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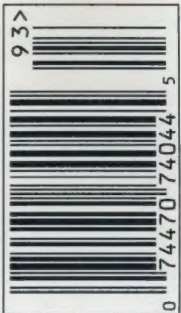
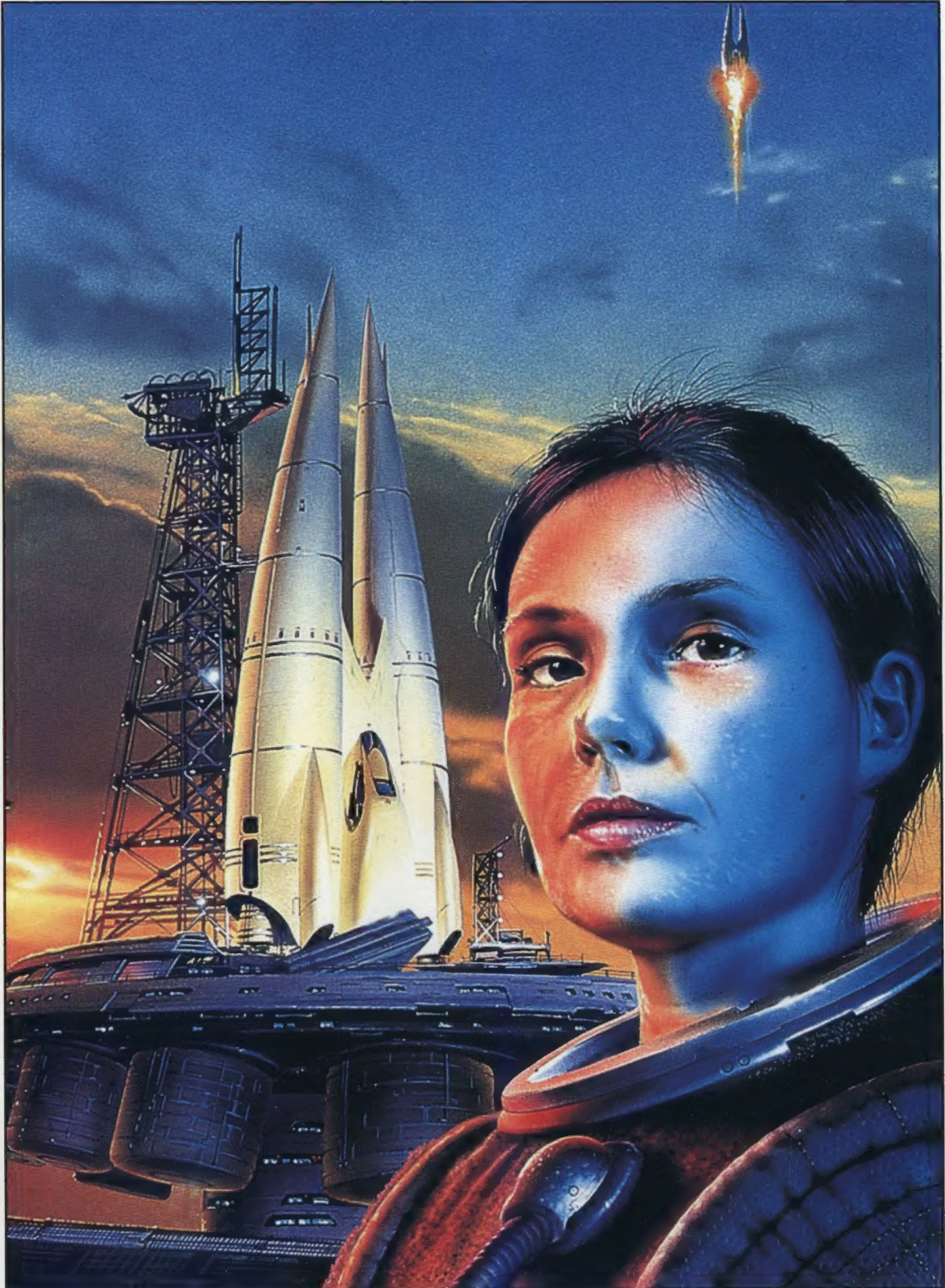
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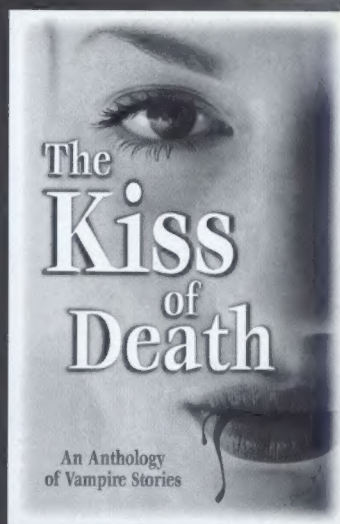
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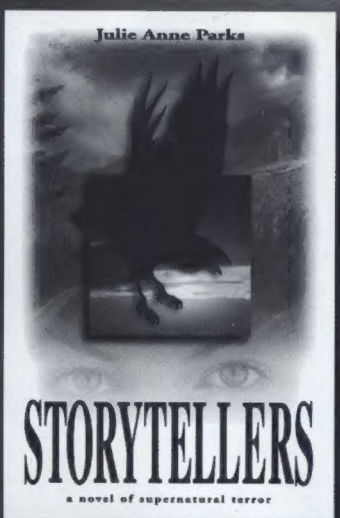


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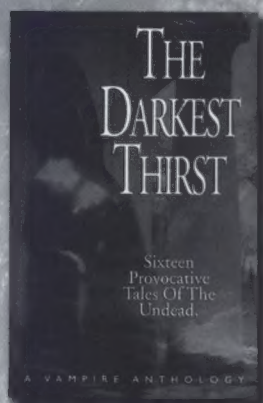


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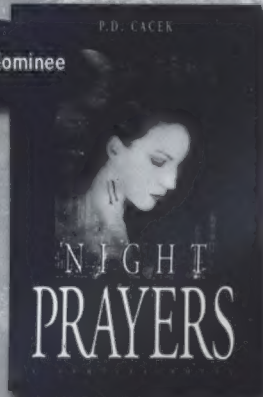
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Locals

By Dennis Fisher

Art by Clyde Duensing, III

Daylight, pallid and diffuse, came through cracks in the cabin walls. Tom stirred, blinked. Far away, someone was chopping wood. He heard each heady *thock*, a creak as the axe came free. Imagined the lift, the pause, and the swing as it started down again.

Thock. Far up in the woods, by the sound.

It stopped. He sat up and felt for his boots. Sometimes the spinners nested in your boots in the night. Tom picked up the left one, up-ended it. No spinners. They weren't exactly dangerous, just a nuisance. It was a hard destiny to have to step onto a cold, squishy body first thing in the morning. And the webs stuck to your skin, and it was the worst godawful mess imaginable. Took solvent to get them off.

No spinners in the right boot either. It was getting a little late in the year for them. They'd be under the cabin now, waiting for the new turn of the year.

Mayna's bed was empty. The warm smell of coffee drifted in from the kitchen, cutting the damp mustiness of the bedroom. Tom got to his feet, wincing a little from the stiffness in his hips.

He went into the kitchen. Mayna's back was to him, her thin neck above the collar all the flesh of her he could see. For a second, his heart gave a little fillip, and he put his hand on the back of a chair to steady himself.

She heard the noise and turned. He got a smile ready. "Mornin', Love," Tom murmured.

Mayna smiled closed-mouthed at him ... her teeth were getting bad and she was ashamed of them. The dentists had all fled with most of the doctors when the troubles started. Otherwise her features were still good, but a little thin, and her eyes had permanent dark circles now. She made a little greeting noise in her throat and turned from him. "Coffee's on."

Tom slid into the chair; the kitchen was small. Rehearsed to himself a familiar truth: he should have got them off on the same flight with the gentility; should have, but for the money. They'd spent everything they had just to get here.

Us. The two of us. They had lost one child and would not have another until the situation was more secure ... she insisted on it. But the years were passing. Getting too old for children, both of them. Almost time for grandkids. Not a good thought. He found an ache in his right arm with his fingers, pressed it.

Mayna glanced out the bare window at the bay, stopped with cloud in the distance. She frowned.

"Going out today?"

"Today and every day," he said agreeably, tensing. There was a long moment while he waited for her reaction. *Not this morning, Mayna, please.*

She nodded, thoughts unspoken. She didn't need to say anything. But there would be no fight today. He

was glad. He didn't have the stomach for it. Since the baby died she'd been almost consumed by her fears for him. It was getting very bad. She probably needed some help. She did need help. But help was not likely to be forthcoming.

They ate skipper eggs and toast. Mayna held her hand on her coffee cup in front of her mouth as she ate. Tom glanced at her covertly and thought with helpless affection: *I don't care about your damn teeth.*

He pushed back his plate, stood carefully to avoid jarring the table, poured himself a last cup, gave Mayna a kiss that she received with a turned face so that he just clipped her ear, and went out. On the front step he took a deep snuffing breath of clean air. Morning smells were still thick all around. Saltwater stink. A strawberry breeze from the ripe grape arbors.

He went to the shed and found his nets and sails. Crusty with salt. They ought to have been washed and dried properly. Somehow the little, necessary tasks weren't as easy as they used to be. Took a little more energy every day. His heart wasn't in them. The fishing was all right, though. Kept your mind in the right tracks.

The boat was drawn up on the beach. The smooth lappawood hull had been lovingly burned and carefully rubbed with oil. A dead nukker lay twisting and bloated in the lapping shore water. Tom kicked it away, and it sank and lay sullen and popeyed. Huge teeth chewed morbidly at a rock. Pig eyes stared.

You only ever see these things dead, he thought. Thank god for that.

He pushed off and paddled away from shore. The locals used to build these canoes with stone axes and heated rocks to burn out the hollows. Now you just took a burner and whoosh, there was a boat. Took a skilled man about fifteen minutes for a crude, serviceable job, versus weeks the old way.

The locals sure did like those burners. They talked about them all the time. Before the troubles they'd even bought a few. Back when the world was new and everybody thought they could all get along.

Foolish hopes of youth. Anybody shoulda seen it.

Tom spread the leg o' mutton sail. A crisp wind took him out into the bay. Far out, a black chip on the water would be Seppie, already working the channel. The boat heeled and sped, and Tom felt his first, chest-filling exhilaration of the day. The starboard outrigger bit and dug, spraying water.

The bay spread out before him, gray sky over an infinity of brown water. A cluster of useless, prickly, islands, not quite an archipelago, dotted the horizon. Even the locals left them alone. Creamy, steel-colored



clouds stuck to the surface of the water like slow-moving ironclads.

Seppie was hunkered down in his boat, trying to free a snagged line. Tom came up beside him and released the sheet, spilling his air. The boat drifted and the sail flapped.

"Mornin'," said Tom.

Seppie twisted his mollusk head around so his rows of tiny cornflower eyes fell on Tom. "Hey," said Seppie. "Don't get too close, now." A mellow, fluid voice, full of strange inflections. A woodwind quality.

"I won't, Seppie. I never do."

"I know. But I'd hate to have to hurt you, Tom." Bubbles spilled out of his mouth as he spoke, quickly decomposing into a liquescent foam that followed his body's ridges in two creamy lines.

"I'd hate that, too."

"So you just keep your distance. I'd hate to lose a good friend like you, *Hoop*."

The hooping noise came when Seppie sucked air in through his exposed glottis. The air was compressed in a chamber at the rear of his shell head. When he talked, the air was blown back across a vibrating palate to form words. At least, that was how it might work. Nobody was sure, because nobody in their right mind would autopsy a local.

Seppie hooped again, but said nothing, though Tom waited. Sometimes they just stored up ahead. Or maybe they had other uses for air.

Tom readied his gear with patient, skillful fingers. Seppie continued to jerk at his tangled lines. His movements were mechanical, autoid.

Seppie's coat was getting extravagant. When Tom first met him, here on the water, it had been drab, brownish with tiny scales. Now, years later, the scales were big as a thumbnail and of every color. He liked Tom to comment on it. The changes had something to do with mating, or aging. Maybe both.

Tom looked at the coat and couldn't think of anything to say.

"Practically no crabs," Seppie sulked, after a while. Tom could see ten at least rattling around in the bilges of the other boat. Blue legs working over angry red pin-cers.

"That so?"

Pessimists. Humorless and honest, thought Tom. With a clean brutality. Not like us. Not devious. We lie to them, saying that we can live together. But we'd kill every one of them if we could.

He pushed the thought away. It wasn't even true. Not of himself, anyway. Seppie was all right. No sense fighting over something that wasn't anybody's fault.

Tom found a hole in one of his nets. Should have fixed this. Getting too sloppy. He tied the frayed ends together.

Seppie finally freed the snag and threw the net ungracefully over the side. The boats drifted back from it, and he dropped the wooden buoy. It was a chunky, alien shape, unlike Tom's turned spindles.

Tom tied a chunk of fish to the center of one of his nets and dropped it in the dark water. Line played out. They always fished together like this. He had no idea why. Safer, maybe. If he fished by himself, he might

forget where he was and come up on Seppie or another local unexpectedly. And then ...

I would hate that.

Hate, thought Tom hopelessly. It just means wouldn't like. They have no concept of what the word means. They don't hate like humans do.

But if he came within a half-boat's length of Seppie, Tom would die. He felt a sudden surge of resentment, even of hatred. Not so much at Seppie, as at the situation. The ridiculous situation. Why did it have to be like this? It's not like the locals are bad, or that we're bad. It's just ...

It's just what happened. No changing it now.

The wind shifted abruptly, and the bows of the boats almost touched. He felt Seppie stiffen, saw the plates come up. The scales were like razors ... He worked the tiller and widened the distance.

Seppie relaxed. He sat on the thwart, hands dangling between his knees. The boats rocked in a swell. This was the time of day when Seppie was his most talkative, his most reflective.

"Thought I'd tell ya. We had a little party on the hill last night."

"Oh?" Tom felt suddenly cold, though a warm little zephyr was just setting in from the east.

"Yeah. There was the, ah, *Hoop* — the Birdchasers, the Big Water clan, most of the Upmarshers except for old Pelly. He's got the seam rot, you know ..." Seppie fingered the seam in his own head. It happened to all of them eventually. Worms in the seam. That was how they died.

"That's too bad," said Tom, thinking, *all of the locals.*

"Yeah. Well, anyway, I thought you should know."

"Preciate it," said Tom, with a false heartiness. Inside he felt as if he'd swallowed a cool, round stone. A stone that filled his guts completely and pressed his lungs shut.

This is important, he thought, with grim unhappiness. A warning. Have to pass it along. Seppie's doing me a favor. Because we're friends. But he knows it doesn't matter.

Quit thinking. Thinking's bad for fishing. Put everything out of your mind except the bait, the traps, the bottom. Crabs don't catch themselves.

The boats worked up and down the channel. Traps were set in a row on the first run, then hauled on the fly. It was tricky work tending sail and hauling traps at the same time.

The first crab came up, spread-eagled in the trap. A female with a spray of purple eggs on each side of the tail. He pried it loose with gloves and threw it into one of two boxes. You had to segregate the sexes or they'd tear themselves to pieces. More bait, and the trap went over again in a different place.

The morning passed quickly. He got fifteen crabs in all, to Seppie's twenty-five. Seppie always got more. He had a way with crabs: Claimed he could see them on the bottom. Maybe he could.

Almost noon, Tom gauged, squinting at the sun. Hot. Quit in a minute, soon as Seppie does.

Seppie brought his boat over, not too close. His boat handling was clumsy. Locals had no feel for sails.

"Any word about that old liner, Tom?" The pressing subject ... always, when you spoke with one of the locals, this topic would come up with an air of suppressed urgency. The locals loved to talk about the liner. They needed to know, they said, so they could plan.

Tom shrugged. "No," he said. "Not for all of these six months."

"Pretty overdue, ain't it?"

"Yeah."

"Hope it comes soon," Seppie bubbled, iridescence sparking from his lips. The trails of drool flowed down, down, and dripped into the bilge of his boat. Tom watched the drops fall onto the spiky carapaces of the crabs.

"Me too."

They'd had this conversation a hundred times, or a thousand. They had this conversation every day.

"I'd sure as hell hate to have to kill and eat ya, Tom."

He means it, too, thought Tom. *He really would hate to have to do that. And he says so every day.*

"Long as that old liner keeps coming, we won't have no problems," said Seppie. "That is surely the truth."

But will it? Tom asked himself. It's late this time. And the last time it was late, that was when the troubles started. And Seppie remembers that, and so do you.

The trip back was quiet — the wind had died a little. Tom tried to enjoy it, but he couldn't stop thinking of Mayna, and of his son. His little dead son. Brown water rippled past, full of shadow shapes. Flash of fishes.

They parted near shore. Tom went home. Seppie headed for the warrens in Round Bay. Tom had never been there, though he and Seppie had talked about the place. Seppie said it was nice. You could get there overland, but it was a hard slog. Easier by water.

Mayna was waiting when he got to the cabin. "The flag is up," she said, watching his face.

He nodded. The yellow flag on the garrison house. Emergency.

"I didn't want to go without you."

"Okay."

He put his gear away haphazardly. Took her hand. They walked up the path through the scrub trees to Southern Shore. The garrison house was on a low rise over the settlement. The narrow yellow flag fluttered a drum beat from the masthead. Nobody was about outside. When the sun was overhead it could burn through paper.

They passed through the broad doors into the cool interior. At first, Tom couldn't see anything but shapes. Then he began to make out faces. Couples. The Shepards. The Ables. Mr. and Mrs. Eng. John Salmonsens, Mayna's brother. And Alice Thompson, here alone. Her solitude bothered Tom. There was something on the table.

"Tom," someone said. "Mayna."

"Yes." And unnecessarily, "It's us."



There was a silence. *What the hell?* he thought.

Somebody die? Then he looked at the table again. Moved toward it.

Before he could get there, someone else spoke. "It's Simon Thompson." This time he recognized the voice. Albert Shepard, the mayor by default of Southern Shore.

He closed his eyes as the room surged. "What happened?" he asked. Knowing.

"One of those *things* killed him." It was John Salmonsens.

"One of those drooling *things*."

John was a woodworker. An artist with the burner. Quick-tempered.

Young. His wife left, Tom remembered. Before the troubles.

The cold seemed to come out of the dark and clutch at his heart. He could see the blanket the body rested on,

the gashes, the blood congealing to a sticky mass.

"He was working," said Albert, his voice a whiskey huskiness. "In the woods. One of the Big Waters was there, and they didn't see each other." Tom heard a soft exclamation from Alice Thompson.

"It was ... self-defense." That damn hair-trigger defensiveness of the locals. Tom thought of the ringing ax this morning. That clear, quick sound of progress. He heard John spit angrily, incredulously, *defense*.

"Simon was a good man," said Albert. "I'm sorry, Alice." Tom could see Albert now: a face full of pain.

Alice didn't say anything. Mayna clutched his hand with frightened strength. Tom winced. He stroked her arm, and the grip relaxed.

"When's the funeral?" asked John bitingly.

"This is all the funeral he gets," said Albert. "We'll put him out tonight."

The scavengers would take him. The dead were never buried. The scavengers would always dig them up, even if they were covered with boulders. It took too much effort to build an inviolable tomb. So the dead went alone and unguarded into the night. In the morning, nothing at all. Not even blood. They scoured it up somehow.

Tom remembered Seppie's warning. Nothing to be done about it now. If the others knew, they'd only be more afraid, to no constructive purpose. Best to be quiet and let events take their course.

They sat with the body until the sun passed the zenith. Albert said a few mild words. Then they wrapped the blanket around Simon like a winding sheet and went to their homes. Mayna wept all the way back. Tom couldn't. The tears would not come. He and Simon had not been close. Only moderate friendships,

he thought, prevail in such close quarters. Simon had been a good man of work, but he was a complainer. That was what stood out on the plateau of Tom's memory. Simon complaining about something. Food? Something political? He couldn't remember.

The failure drained him. Troubling not to be able to think well of the dead.

He was suddenly tired and sick. He felt Mayna's fear and sorrow as an illness. She was going away from him, and there was nothing he could do about it. If only the liner would come ...

Fact, he thought: my best friend in this place is an ugly creature who would kill me in a minute. Seppie and his damned honesty. Didn't even know the value of a comfortable lie. Didn't know what a lie was.

They ate cold crab and legumes. After dinner, she lit the lamp. Fish oil gave a guttering and blackening light.

"I don't want you going out anymore," she said. He'd known it was coming.

"I have to."

"You could do something else."

Body on the table. Simon Thompson. Dead eyes of astonishment. Even now, the scavengers were moving in. He shuddered.

"I'm a waterman. That's what I do."

"Do something else," she repeated, reasonably. But there was a desperate appeal in her eyes.

He took her hand. Looked at it. The skin was getting thin over her bones and veins. Water started up in his eyes.

"I wish ..." words came hard.

"Yes?"

I wish I was a more successful man. I wish the baby was still alive.

She was waiting.

"I wish we'd never come here," he said.

She nodded. Squeezed his hand. "Me too."

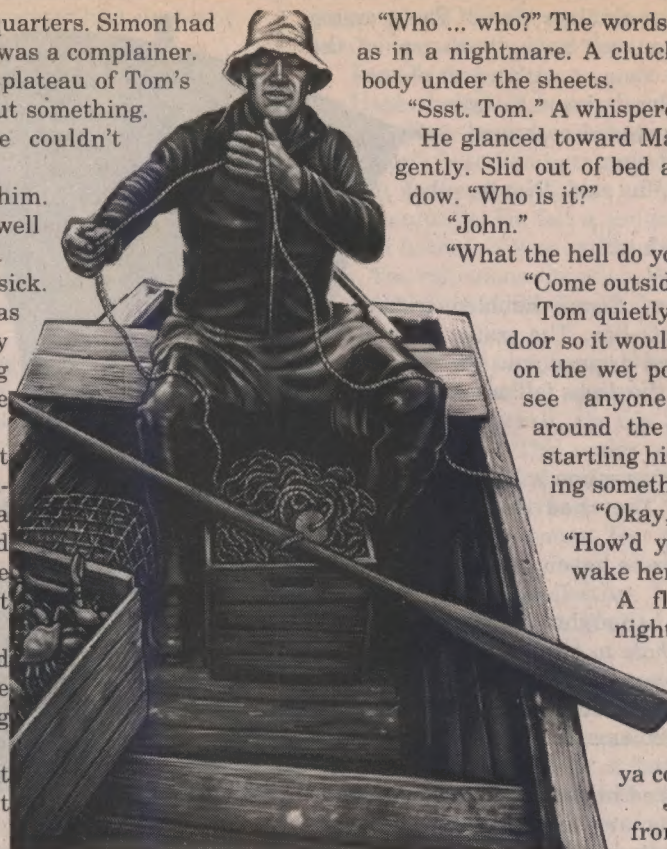
We arrived here a group of eager and hungry failures, he thought. Remembering the time: so excited, so ready. Difference is, we're not eager or hungry anymore. Ready to go home, that's all. Dead dog burnt out.

"The liner's coming," he said, without any confidence at all.

"Sure it is." She sounded even less certain than he did to himself.

Because the day the locals think it isn't coming back, that's the day the troubles start again. And this time they won't be content with one settlement. This time they'll do all of us.

He woke in the dark. Turned his eyes slowly toward the window. There was a head there, silhouetted against the faint phosphorescence of the bay. His mouth went dry.



"Who ... who?" The words came out unwillingly, as in a nightmare. A clutching fear stiffened his body under the sheets.

"Ssst. Tom." A whispered voice.

He glanced toward Mayna, who was snoring gently. Slid out of bed and moved to the window. "Who is it?"

"John."

"What the hell do you want at this hour?"

"Come outside."

Tom quietly went out and held the door so it wouldn't bang. Stood naked on the wet porch. At first he didn't see anyone. Then John came around the corner of the house, startling him again. He was carrying something in a burlap sack.

"Okay, I'm up," Tom said.

"How'd you know you wouldn't wake her?"

A flash of teeth in the night. A grin. "Oh, Mayna's always slept like the dead."

"True." There was a pause. "What'd ya come for, John?"

John half turned away from him, took a big breath of air. "Smells nice

tonight."

Tom waited. In profile, he could see the long white face, trim moustache. The mop of hair.

"It's time we did something about those things."

Tom didn't have to ask which things. It was the only way John ever referred to the locals.

"How?"

John opened the bag, took something out of it. Tom gave an involuntary gasp when he saw what it was.

"I've got the burner. We can hit Round Bay tonight, while they're sleeping. Burn out the warrens." He hefted the bulky tool. Its chrome parts gleamed, and the thick wires were arcs against the pale light.

"Hell, John. Where did you get that?"

"From the garrison. Cabinet wasn't even locked." Of course it wasn't. Who until now had a reason for stealing it?

"You've got to put it back. That's community property."

"I'm doing this for the community." He sounded confident, sure of himself.

Tom felt a sudden surge of fear, fought it down. He still wasn't completely awake. Not fit to make a decision. He took deep, quiet breaths. Tried to clear his brain.

Grab the burner? No. John was quick. An artist.

"Face it. The liner isn't coming. We're on our own. Have to make our own way here."

Tom shook his head in rejection. It couldn't be true.

"I want you to come with me."

"I can't do that."

"It's what Mayna wants. She told me so."

She probably did, at that. He blew out a long breath

before answering. "I don't care. She isn't thinking clearly now. Neither are you."

"You're wrong. I've never been more sure of anything in my life."

I'm ten years older than him, thought Tom. Might as well be a thousand. "I wish you'd think about this."

"I have. More than you. It's time." John nodded toward the shore. "You can take us in your boat. Quicker than walking."

"I won't."

"Why not?"

A good question. He felt the doubts rising in his mind, one by one. Should he go? What would the consequences be? Was it the right thing to do?

His answer was the only thing he knew for certain. "I won't kill a local. If we fight, then we all die."

John took a few steps backward, widening the distance between them. The nozzle of the burner twitched. Tom kept his eyes on it. "Then loan me your boat."

"No."

"I could take it." The nozzle moved around. Not threatening; just present.

"You could. But you can't sail it."

John took another step back. "I'm disappointed. Thought you had more guts."

"Sorry." He felt shame burn his cheeks in the dark. But it wasn't fear of the locals. It was the consequences.

John, deliberately: "They'll kill us all."

"Probably." In self-defense. Because they think they can't trust us. And they can't.

John shook his head in disgust, turned his back, and walked off down the path. Tom listened to his footsteps receding. Faint steps on the fallen leaves.

Then nothing.

He went to the shed and found a shovel. Hefted it. No, he surely wouldn't kill a local. But a man?

Tom looked down the dark path. I could catch him. He's just walking.

He put the shovel back. There was another way.

Tom stood, naked and chilled, looking out across the bay. A catspaw rippled the water there. He felt the wind on his chest and forehead.

A nice sailing breeze.

It would take John three hours to get to the warrens on foot, easy. If he didn't get lost. He'd find them eventually, though. Just had to follow the shoreline.

Probably doesn't know they sleep underwater. The burner's no good to him by night. But in the early morning they'll come up, and he'll be waiting.

On the shore the boat rocked and thumped, restless on the restless waters.

He went inside to get his clothes.

In the morning there was something in the bottom of the canoe, covered with a piece of cloth. The cloth was native, a ragged weave of bark strips that suggested a local's skin.

Under it was the burner. A little muddy, but undamaged. As agreed. Seppie had kept his part of the bargain, the bargain Tom had made with him the night before. Must have been difficult: the locals loved these burners. An awful temptation to keep it. But Seppie had sworn. And the locals were honest and kept their

word. Always.

The nozzle was blackened. It hadn't been cleaned after the last firing. He touched the soot, rubbed his fingers together. So John got a couple off. Good, he thought. Might make them think twice. Maybe it did some good after all.

Sorry, John, he thought. I had to warn them. They'll let us live now, long enough.

Tom covered it back up. It was early yet. Plenty of time to get it back to the garrison before anyone else was about.

Out on the water there was a low, dark shape with a flogging sail. Tom waved. *Beat me out again, did you?* It was making up to be a first-rate day. Not a cloud anywhere, and the breeze was perfect. Crabs are calling, old man.

Tom dropped his arm.

Thinking: no point to any of it. Just damn bad luck.

He started toward the cabin, wondering how much to tell, how much to keep back. She would have to understand. It was necessary and it was right.

But what if she didn't?

Poor Mayna. A son and now a brother. Maybe a husband, now, if she can't find the strength to forgive me. He shook his head. If the liner comes soon, then it will be all right. All will be right. □

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The next issue of *Aboriginal Science Fiction* will feature another story set in the same setting as "Locals" in this issue: "Feeders," by Dennis Fisher, with another encounter between Tom and Seppie. We'll also have "Forked Tongue," by Mark Huntley Parsons, which explores how what you eat can affect who you are. Then there's "On the Radio," by Joseph Flanagan, "No Job Too Small," by Wil McCarthy, "A Wheel in a Wheel," by Debbie Stiff Baker, "The Prometheus Code," by Gary M. Gibson, and "Close Quarters," by Stefano Donati, or "Jack's Hand," by Stephen Woodworth.

We'll also have our usual assortment of columns by Darrell Schweitzer, Mark Olsen, Robert A. Metzger, Marvin Kaye, Laurel Lucas, and the Alien Publisher.

A Girl in Every Universe

By Terry McGarry

Art by Larry Blamire

I threw down the antique joystick in frustration: thanks to my spastic control of his vine-swinging, Tarzan had crashed into a tree, been eaten by an alligator, and fallen into quicksand three times each in the last five minutes.

This was Jack's game. Why in the hell was I sitting here losing at it when he was hours late for dinner and the ITD was going to be officially unveiled in the morning?

As archivist, I wasn't needed for the technical finishing touches on the Interdimensional Transport Device, and as physicist, Jack was. But there was no reason I couldn't head over to the lab, jot a few notes, and drag him home for some much-needed sleep. I grimaced at my drawn features in the hall mirror, fluffed my dark hair, and left our apartment.

The ITD Complex, in the subterranean depths of the Manhattan Applied Sciences Center, was a brief tube ride away. Once inside its various security fields, I checked Jack's office and the vending area, and then opened the thick plastisteel door to the project room with my card. Five Visiglas sections away was Jack.

With a leggy redhead on his lap.

Jack glanced up, looking first startled, then scared. He said something urgent to the redhead and got up, dumping her off his lap; she didn't seem a bit concerned. Then he went to one of the ITD chutes, pulling her along, and as I slid open the door to the next section he twirled the lock and swung open the heavy, round steel door of the cylinder.

And then the redhead looked over her shoulder, to see what he was reacting to ... and I saw that she was me.

I'd been a waitress while in college. From her outfit, it appeared that in her universe she had stayed one. She twirled her hair the same way I do, and her catty smile looked painfully like mine — only with the dimple on the other side, since her face was not my own seen in a mirror.

Jeez, I thought, how can you be jealous of yourself? I'd assumed that doppelgangers were just theories. Looking at myself in his arms made me reconsider clawing her eyes out: the do-unto-others rule took on new significance. Jack was the culprit here. He was yanking both our chains.

I was through the third 'glas partition by the time he managed to get her legs into the chute and close the hatch. His fingers danced over the switches before it had even closed completely, sending her into God knew what dimension. As I entered the fifth section I saw that he had triggered the autoset controls. He was climbing into the cylinder. He was

going to follow her.

"What the hell are you doing?" I was yelling as I came through the last partition — but he was gone.

Regroup, I told myself, trying to quell my anger and astonishment. Sit down. Think this through.

I reset the controls and followed them.

The ITD Drop is not a fun ride. First you stuff your body into a cylinder that looks from the outside and feels from the inside like a drawer in a morgue. Then there is the sensory-deprivation free-fall. It was tempting to urp, despite the close quarters. But fury sustained me, and in literally no (objective) time I was standing in a cathedral-size, luminescent mall.

Nobody took any notice of me. At either end of the vast space, caterpillar-like escalators stretched up almost as far as the eye could see. Everything was immaculate, polished chrome and glass, and down the middle of it all ran an endless, gleaming newsstand.

I stepped closer to it; there must have been thousands of newspapers and magazines. "I'll take a *Post-Dispatch*, a *Times-Newsday-Standard*, a *Murdoch Daily News*, a *Newhouse Gazette-Examiner*, and a *Timeweek*," I heard a man on the other side say, and through the glass I saw periodicals drop neatly, one by one, into his outstretched arms. If it were Sunday, I thought, this guy would need a forklift.

As I looked up, I saw that around the entire perimeter of the room, above the archways and under the escalator, ran a continuous lightboard, displaying graphics and printed news. Framing the archways were smaller boards, probably private, showing ads. I walked to the wall and read one. IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS THE ERASER. RUBBER, DURABLE. THEN THERE WAS ERASABLE BALLPOINT INK. AFTER THAT CAME WHITE-OUT, CORRASABLE PAPER, CORRECTO-TAPE; THEN EDITABLE, SPLICEABLE AUDIO, FILM, AND VIDEO. AT LAST CAME THE COMPUTER: FIX YOUR MISTAKES BEFORE YOU PRINT! BUT NOW, FOR THE FIRST TIME ... IT'S ERASE-AN-EXPERIENCE!!! ANYTHING BAD THAT HAPPENS, ANY STUPID MISTAKE YOU MAKE — GO BACK INSTANTLY AND DO IT OVER. THE REDUBBED OVERDUBBED MULTI-TRACK LIFESTYLE OF THE FUTURE! NO MORE SLEEPLESS NIGHTS CRINGING OVER EMBARRASSING FAUX PAS. NO MORE SOCIAL GAFFES, NO MORE FREUDIAN SLIPS. SPECIAL



TEMPORAL-SPECIFIC CONTINUITY-REVERSAL MACHINE DOES IT ALL! PUSH A BUTTON WITHIN TEN SECONDS OF A BOO-BOO AND REWIND IMMEDIATELY TO ANY POINT UP TO TEN MINUTES BEFORE YOU GOOFED. THOSE AROUND YOU WILL NEVER KNOW!

A sudden commotion among the few dwarfed travelers around me brought my eyes up to the main news readout. "HEARST HEIR, CONVICTED OF PLAGIARISM, SENTENCED TO DEATH" read the screen. That was enough for me; I ran for the escalator and took the fast-moving steps two at a jump. It was time to find Jack and get out of here.

At the top of the escalator, a man in a white suit was typing, into a portable device, what appeared to be a summons, droning out charges to a chagrined-looking traveler. "Dangling a participle in public, fifty dollars ..."

He was interrupted by the miscreant as I passed. "Look, just get this over with, okay? All I want is to fragging go home —"

"Deliberate splitting of an infinitive, seventy dollars ..."

"Jeez!"

I hurried on through what turned out to be another cavernous mall, this one ringed by concession stands with their own flashing ad boards. A woman layered in colorful rags jabbed a book at me: *THE ART OF PANHANDLING*. "Yours for a small donation!" she said, and the contralto voice followed me as I strode away: "Just ninety dollars! All right, for you, ten! ..."

At the top of the next escalator, I emerged into the street. To my dismay, every store that wasn't selling stationery, books, or word processors was a restaurant. How would I ever figure out where Jack had gone?

I looked up. The buildings all bore the names of prominent publications; the skyscrapers formed vast canyons, albeit clean ones, and the streets were filled with streamlined taxis, the sides of which were themselves lightboards. "OWEN KING III'S HUNDREDTH-BOOK CELEBRATION TO BE HELD IN ..." was all I caught of one as it passed by. I stood in total indecision. I didn't have much time.

"Come on," said a female voice, and someone grabbed my arm. "We don't have much time."

I turned to see a leggy blonde. Her face looked exactly like mine. She hustled me into a taxi. "What the hell" — I sat down hard and was scrunched back by the acceleration of the vehicle — "is going on?"

My look-alike extended a hand. "Hi. I'm Valerie." I shook it. "So am I."

"I know." She giggled. "I figured you'd suss Jack out eventually. When he came up to the office in a total state, I knew you couldn't be far behind. I left him at the Seven Seasons and came looking for you. Luckily I picked the right entrance to stake out."

I shook my head vigorously. "So you know about me. So you know about the ITD. Jack's been giving out a lot of privileged information during his cheating expeditions." But where the hell was the red-

head?

She giggled again, and it came to me that I didn't do much giggling; the sound was almost completely unfamiliar, despite her voice's identical timbre. "Don't flatter yourself. You think you're the only universe that has the Swing?"

"We call it the Drop."

"Whatever; different universes come up with different names."

"You mean other ones have it? And you know about it? Good grief —"

"Your horizons need a little broadening, sweetie. And since you've let yourself in for a pack of trouble" — Gad, I thought, do I really talk like that? — "we've got some briefing to do." While she was speaking she had been typing onto a board and then leaning down for a retinal scan. It gave me a start when I looked forward and didn't see a cabbie; I had thought my New York was pretty high-tech, but even computers couldn't negotiate our Fifth Avenue.

She noticed my surprise. "Yeah, your Jack did a double-take on that one, too. It took a lot out of New York when we lost the old talkative cabdrivers. But in these autocabs you can get a running commentary — with perfect grammar." She giggled again. I just grunted.

"We're going to Chumley's. It's a writers' mecca; my editor cronies won't be there. We'll have some privacy to discuss the Jacks."

The Jacks. Of course. He would have doppelgangers, too.

"If there's more than one of him, why didn't you stick to your own Jack?" I said, my resentment showing.

There was that giggle again. "For fun. I'm a Swingsetter. Top editors in this town don't really edit; we just acquire things, go out to lunch, and let the copyeditors do the gruntwork. My Jack was getting dull, so I went looking for a better one."

"What the devil is the difference?" I cried, more confused with her every giggled word, not to mention thrown for a loop by talking to a bleached-out version of my brunette self.

"What's the difference between us?" she asked, with an impish sidelong grin.

I sighed. "I suppose you've met others of us."

"Several. It's quite a shock sometimes. Did you know that in Universe Three Hundred we're actually a — Oh, here we are. Come on."

She led me out of the taxi and into a ramshackle pub in a Disneyesque Greenwich Village. Inside it was dark and smoky, old wooden tables and chairs in disarray. We sat down between a set of pipe-smoking men in corduroy jackets with padded elbows and a pale couple clad in black, smoking clove cigarettes and drinking wine from jars. "Evening, Val," said one of the corduroys. We both looked over; she smiled at him and ordered us two Jack the Rippers from the bartender — which I would have thought a tasteless joke if that hadn't been my favorite cocktail: Jack Daniels, ginger ale, and grenadine for color. "Is that a problem, that he

knows you?" I asked, thinking of her comment about privacy.

"Naw. I gave him his start in the field. Hell, I started out as a librarian, myself."

"Figures," I said, thinking of my own archivist status, and took a sip of the welcome drink.

"Now." She crossed her legs and leaned one elbow on the table. I hastily undid myself from the same position. "Here's your briefing. There are an infinite number of alternative universes — and it should be 'alternative,' as 'alternate' in the strict sense doesn't mean the same thing, despite the infamous permissiveness of Web and other descriptive dictionaries — branching from the causal tree. That's why we call it *Swinging*, because it's like swinging from one branch to another. But a better analogy would be *acoustic*. The different lines of causality are like sound waves, the cosmic ebb and flow of events being a kind of modulated sine wave. You can't *Swing* to a branch that's too close to your own, because the sine waves are too similar, and it causes a beating effect that drives you mad or kills you when you *Swing* over. It's like harmony; a note too similar to another note, played at the same time, sounds dissonant and hurts your ears, but one with a sufficiently dissimilar frequency will be more harmonious. You're lucky you happened to explore universes that were in harmony with your branch. Other universes — ours, for example — had to find out the hard way, by reeling in dead or insane explorers and deducing what had happened."

"I suppose Chinese people can get closer, then, with quarter-tones and all," I said sarcastically — or was it ironically? But I was intrigued by the analogy. "What if you *Swing* to a really faraway branch? Do you get the effect of octaves? Do you find identical universes?"

"No one has *Swung* far enough yet. You have to do it in increments, using nearby universes as *Swingboards*. It gets confusing, and you can get lost; there are still some explorers unaccounted for from the old days. We don't understand the whole thing yet."

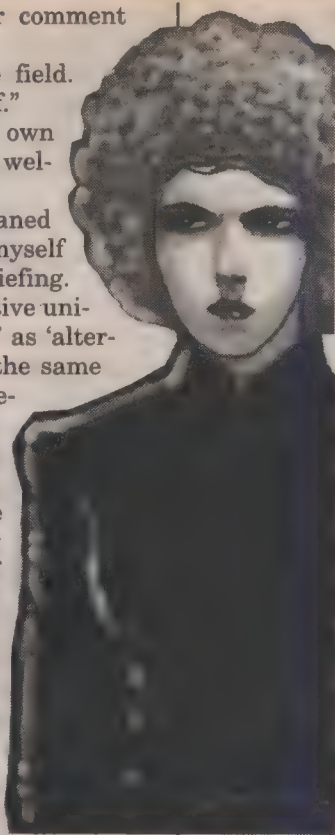
That gave me a cold feeling. "Are all the timelines roughly equal in development? Could there be really advanced universes that can *Swing* in and get the drop — as it were — on us?"

She nodded, looking serious at last. "Yes. They're not necessarily *that* much advanced, but we suspect some have organized and are using their ability and knowledge to subjugate other universes, especially ones that don't have the *Swing* yet."

"Or are just developing it. Like mine."

"For example."

"So what is this, like an interdimensional Mafia?"



"Mafia?" she echoed, puzzled; then she brightened. "Oh, like that dark-fantasy novel by Puzo. Something like that. Anyway, right now our biggest problem is with a group that's been trying to substitute themselves for their doubles in nicer universes. I'm part of a counter-group; I was recruited just before I met your Jack. And now that you have a *Swing* that can be subverted," she added, "I think you'd better be part of it, too."

I downed the rest of my Ripper and gestured to the bartender for another one. "Is that why no one was surprised that I 'dropped in' on your Grand Central?"

The bartender set down two more drinks. "And why the barman here ain't askin' Val where she came up with the twin sister," he said gruffly.

"Isn't asking," she corrected, and smiled as he turned away in a huff.

I thought to look around me for other eavesdroppers. The corduroys winked almost in unison, and the wine-jars raised them in a toast.

"Wow," was all I could come up with. "So what happens now?"

"Well —"

Panic stabbed me, and I looked at my watch. I had set the timer to bring me back in an hour — and the hour was up.

When I told her, Valerie scribbled quickly on a napkin. "These are the coordinates for my town house." She pressed the napkin into my hand, drew back, and opened her mouth to add something — but that's all she wrote.

Choking and nauseated, I felt the cylinder coalesce around me, and I struggled out. The lab was as I'd left it, bright and empty. I shut the hatch and looked stupidly at the napkin in my hand.

I had no more room for surprise when Jack materialized before my eyes. Why hadn't he come through the device? Using someone else's device, apparently ...

"Goddammit, Jack," I began. Then I registered the second figure, right behind him. The figure of a man holding a gun.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," he said wryly in response to my aborted tirade.

"As a matter of fact, at this point, I would," I replied, my eyes on the bulbous gun held by the stocky, hairy thug.

Jack followed my gaze, and then grinned a rakish Jack grin. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed that lately; he hadn't seemed himself. "Oh, him," he said. "Don't worry about that."

The thug backed away. "Now, don't be stupid, Jackie," he growled. "You're gonna sit tight here with me until tomorrow morning, and then we're gonna state our demands to all the nice notables

who show up for the ceremony. Your girlfriend gets to stay here, too. So you might as well sit down and get comfy —"

Jack stepped right up to the gun and twisted it out of the guy's hand. I could not fathom why the guy didn't shoot him. He just countered with a judo-ish move that Jack counter-countered to leave them flailing at each other on the floor.

Since Jack was obviously too busy to yell "Get the gun, Val!" I went ahead and picked it up myself, gingerly, assuming it was some kind of weird laser thing. But of course I was unable to get a clear shot, with them tussling around; and the odd thing was, it seemed more like a college wrestling match than a fight for their lives. They weren't trying to do each other any damage.

"Jack, for God's sake just punch him or something," I said. After they'd continued their boyish scuffle for two more minutes, I stepped in, flipped the guy's arm neatly behind his back, and dragged him up to his knees.

"Ow!" he yelled querulously. "You're hurting me! That's not fair!"

Jack rose and brushed himself off. "He thinks if you hurt him you'll hurt his doppelganger in some other universe. It's against their rules. They need live people to change places with."

The guy wasn't even struggling, but I kept my grip just firm enough to insure it. "You're the only doppelganger I want to do some damage to right now, Jack," I said. "Why didn't he shoot you? Same altruistic reason?"

"Yeah. I overheard some of them talking, outside the room they kept me in. My dopp is their leader, so they had to keep me alive. Weird superstition, if you ask me. What are you doing here this late, anyway? Have you been here all evening?"

I stared at him, blinked a couple of times, and then realized that this was *my* Jack. Good news for me, but bad news for Edit Val. The Jack who'd been jerking us around — the Jack she'd been recruiting — was the enemies' leader!

In my momentary daze, I didn't notice the bad guy's free arm moving to his belt. I looked down, about to speak to him — and he faded right out of my hands.

"Goddammit!" I said, and glared at Jack. "You didn't tell me they had remote controls!"

He shrugged, chagrined. "Didn't know, Val."

I pulled the wadded napkin from my pocket and ran quickly to one of the chutes to program the coordinates. "So they kidnapped you?" I said over my shoulder as I punched buttons.

"Five days ago. They held me in this tiny room —"

"Hold that thought, Jack," I said, moving to the next chute. "We have to rescue Edit Val. She's the dopp I met when I went chasing after a guy I thought was *you* — and if that sounds confusing, you ain't heard nothin' yet. Get in."

"Okay," he said, his old amiable self, and complied. But as I pulled the other hatch shut on myself I thought, with a sinking feeling that merged into

the sensation of Drop, *God, I hope the coordinates are analogous* —

We emerged into a vast meadow. The expanse of grass was brilliantly lit by a full moon and its ripply reflection in a nearby pond.

"Well?" said Jack from two feet away. "Who do we rescue?"

"Aw, shoot," I replied, and sat down cross-legged, too dejected even to mind the dew that instantly soaked my pants. "And I set the timer for a bloody hour."

Well, at least that would give us a chance to catch up. I told Jack what had happened to me. He responded by explaining how he'd been working in the lab late five days ago when a stranger materialized in the project room. He'd been fascinated, until he was blindfolded at gunpoint and manhandled into the chute to spend five days under interrogation in a room in some other dimension.

It dawned on him, as I described my own adventures, that some other Jack had been living with me for five days, and I wasn't sure whether he was relieved or insulted when I told him his doppelganger had been interested only in the ITD.

"Well," I said, glancing at my watch, "that took about ten minutes —"

I had been about to point out how well the romantic ambience would suit a warm reunion like ours when Jack, his eyes focused beyond my suggestive face, said, "Someone's coming."

I twisted around to see a dark shape moving toward us, barely discernible in the shadow of a cloud. "Should we run?" I asked Jack.

He quirked his mouth and said, "Where?"

He had a point. "Guess we'll just have to face it, whatever it is." I glanced up at the full moon again. "You suppose this is the Werewolf Universe?"

Jack draped an arm around my shoulders, and we watched as the figure approached, emerging at last from the shadow to have its female face illuminated in stark white. She was still fifty feet away, but there was already no doubt. It was me again.

"Saw you folks Slide in," she called, resolving, as she strode up to us, into a lean, craggy-faced Valerie in a black jumpsuit, wearing a backpack and a haircut a Marine would have considered short.

"Valerie?" I asked.

"The same," she said, grinning in a masculine sort of way that set her immediately apart from my other selves. She stuck out a callused hand. "Pleased to meetcha, Val."

"This is Jack," I said, but she was studying him with clear recognition and affection — and wistfulness.

"By God, you *do* take after my Johnny boy," she said, shaking her head. "Lost him years ago, after our third or fourth Slide."

I looked at her closely. "You're one of those first explorers, aren't you," I said. "One of the ones who never came back."

"That very breed."

"Where are we?" I asked her, as she produced a

ground cloth from her pack and settled cross-legged in front of us.

"New York, sister," she replied. "Somewhere around Midtown, I'd say offhand. The city's underneath you. Seems a meteor hit here about a century ago, changed everything. You averse to saying where you Slid in from?"

"New York," I said automatically, and then realized that more identification was required. "It went bankrupt for good in 2005 and was taken over by a consortium of universities. The whole Eastern seaboard is one big education-and-research center."

Explorer Val nodded. "I was from United Americas, which became one big amusement park. I got sick of those penny-ante games and joined up as one of the first Slide explorers. I can tell you, I have seen some strange universes. Before you know it, you go too far, you find yourself in vacuum, 'cause there's no Earth, no nothing. I decided I liked the peace and quiet here. Sometime I'm gonna go looking for a dimension where there's still a Coney Island with a Cyclone ... but this is home, for now."

I looked at her crow's-feet, her once-broken nose. "You never wanted to report what you'd seen? So they could know?"

"Naw. The real trailblazers just go, they don't send dispatches. We know who we are, and keep to ourselves, mostly. I'm a friendly exception." She grinned again, and I noticed some teeth missing. I would never grimace at myself in the mirror again.

"Maybe you could help us," I said. "There's this other Jack plotting an evil takeover, but I messed up and sent us here for an hour, and all hell is probably breaking loose back home."

Explorer Val sighed. "That kind of crap is always happening. We hear about it all the time, down here, one way or another. I'm afraid we just don't get involved in local coups."

"It's okay," I said.

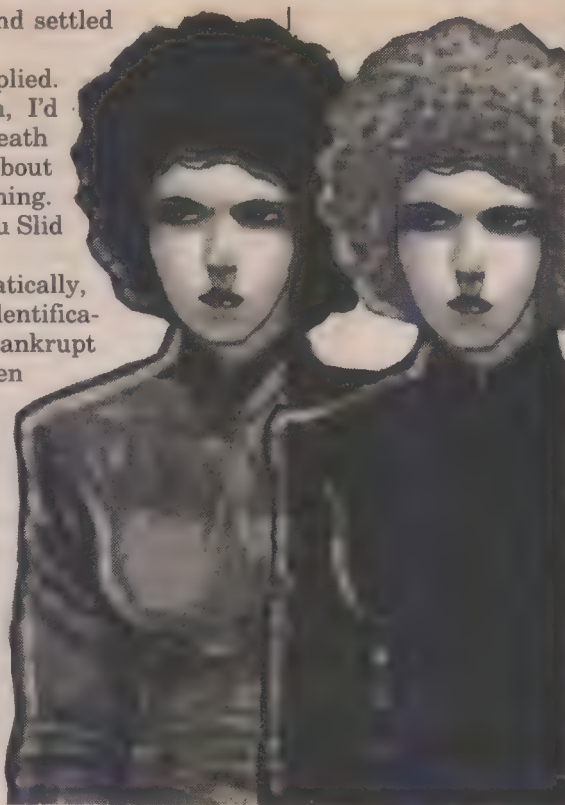
She crossed her legs the other way and leaned an elbow on her knee, reaching up to pull on an earlobe in what must have been a vestigial impulse toward hair-twirling. "Tell ya what, though ... I can give you a Traveller."

"A what?" said Jack.

"One of these." She swung her pack around and extracted a palm-size oval, something between a pet rock and a Silly Putty egg. "It'll get you home."

I sprang to my feet. "What do I do?"

"Squeeze it and visualize your destination — and remember that it only works between dimensions, not from one place to another in the same one. Be



specific about details only your dimension has, or you might end up in one too close. You do know about Sliding too close ... ?"

"I've been warned," I said, and reached to shake her hand again. "Will I ever see you again?"

"Come visit anytime. Just don't bring too many of your friends." She slung her pack onto one shoulder and faded into the moonshadows.

"Hold on to me, Jack," I said, and he obliged happily. I closed my eyes tight and visualized the mother of all newsstands, bracing for a wave of nausea.

Nothing happened. I opened my eyes, about to shout angrily after my doppelganger, and found that we were in the Editworld concourse I had envisioned. This was great! Dropping without discomfort!

I looked around, got my bearings, and then made my way over to the small concession stand I had been gawking at not that long before. Ads were running on the board, but not the one I was looking for. Dictionaries, editing software ... a program to generate new Shakespeare plays ... "Selected E-Mail of Ten Great Authors" ... and then there it was.

"Jack, you have any chimeras on you?" I asked, hoping he had some of the disintegrating currency we'd devised.

He shook his head.

"Damn, I need a credit chip or something. Unless ..." I remembered Edit Val staring at the taxi board. "Hmm," I said, searching for anything that looked like a retinal scanner. Finding an eye-level slit, I stared into it and murmured, "I owe ya, Val ..."

In a few moments, Jack and I were the proud owners of a brand-new Erase-an-Experience module. We wasted no time running upstairs and flagging a taxi, for which I paid with another wide-eyed stare after typing CHUMLEYS into the comp pad, hoping an address would not be required. It gave me a momentary scare when it wouldn't recognize the destination — until I remembered to insert the apostrophe.

The place was deserted except for Valerie herself, seated at a table in the middle, twirling her hair nervously. As I rushed over she stood up abruptly, nearly spilling her Ripper.

"Valerie," she gasped, "right after you left I checked Jack's personal Swing and found out he never returned to your universe, he went to number eighteen, the most *disgusting*, crowded place, and who *knows* where he went from there. I knew you

hadn't heard what I'd said about adapting the coordinates to my place, so I came back here —" She stopped, and her face turned quizzical as she focused on the Jack I had brought with me.

"It's okay, Val, don't worry. We got a little sidetracked by the coordinate thing ... but I got this." I raised the egg for her inspection. "We can use it to follow the other Jack. I'd say he'll go right to where they've been holding *my* Jack" — I tapped him possessively — "for the last five days. The other one became a double agent in your task force, while masquerading as my housemate here."

Valerie looked thoughtful and said, "No wonder he was so grumpy ..."

"Jack said they Dropped into our lab from somewhere in the same building he was held in. It's gotta be in midtown Manhattan somewhere, right?"

Val nodded. "Yes, it's like being in the same measure of a tune."

"But, Val," Jack said, and we both turned to him. "All I can visualize is the little room where I was detained. I was blindfolded when they moved me. If we got trapped in there, and lost your Traveller ..."

"Hmm." I sat down on a trendy-looking milk crate and took a sip of Edit Val's drink. "What do you think, Val? Can we Drop near the room, but not in it?"

"Well, if it's a world I know at all ... or if it's in the Swingsetter catalogue ... maybe we could get it from details Jack remembers. Anything come to mind, Jack?" she said, batting her eyes at him. "Any sounds or smells?"

Jack and I had both been through the Olfactomnemonic memorization system in school, and I had a feeling he might get something from the latter suggestion. To me, the smell of burnt broccoli would always be the periodic table, and cherrywood incense the list of U.S. presidents ...

"Well, I did think it was weird at the time, but *Henry V* passages and my tensies table kept popping into my head out of nowhere," he said.

"That would be ... let's see ... engine oil and horse manure!" I said, pleased with my reverse memory.

Edit Val pursed her lips. "That doesn't do much good, so far," she said. "Any distinctive sounds?"

"Yeah, there were. Bells ringing ... and faraway cheers ... and people were yelling numbers all the time, ratios, I think; maybe that's what brought on the tensies —"

"No, I've got it!" Edit Val cried. "In Universe Seventy-Seven, New York has turned into a bookie's paradise. They bet on everything. There are fifty kinds of horse racing and a hundred kinds of vehicle racing, which would explain the engine oil and horse manure; there are the bells of slot machines and boxing matches, and of course there's a constant hubbub in the streets of guys making odds ..."

"So let's go!" I said.

"Without help, without backup?"

"From what Jack's kidnapper said, we only have until morning, and it's getting pretty close right now."

"Once more unto the breach, dear friends," Jack said, apparently still stimulated by remembered horse manure.

"Once more," I echoed, and squeezed the egg as Jack and Edit Val took hold of my arms.

It was just as she had described it, a blooming, buzzing confusion of oddsmakers and people waving bills at them. The concrete under our feet was littered with torn ticket stubs, and you could barely tell it was nighttime — even at 2 a.m., the neon glare was a sick version of daylight.

A guy in a plaid jacket and Irish cap strode over to us. "Odds, getcher odds here!" he shouted. "Ten-to-two these three just came in on the Fader! Ten-to-two! Twenty says you can't guess what dimension!"

We were immediately surrounded by a group of the tackiest-dressed people I could imagine. Someone pointed out that judging by the twins we came from two different dimensions, and someone else gave odds on which of us Jack belonged to, and the babble of numbers crescendoed as the bills flew.

Edit Val was batting at the hands of curious bettors, and I was looking around cluelessly for an escape. Jack stepped away from us. "Okay," he said, raising his arms. "Fifty says no one here can show us where the Fader center is! No payoff till we're there!"

I had to hand it to him. We were detained until we had settled their bets, but then we were hustled off to an OTB skyscraper, through the doors, and into a vast lobby filled with lights: stock-market readouts, track results, lottery numbers — a phosphor overload.

Immediately one of our escorts piped up, "A hundred says he can't pay off in real money," and as the bets were taken Jack pulled his pockets inside out, and we fled across the lobby as the angry takers were distracted by payoffs.

"Lucky for us there's a sucker born every minute," I said breathlessly, "even here."

"They're coming after us," Edit Val said as we reached the other side of the lobby. We made our way around the curved wall until we came to a door marked AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY. The two bettors we had stiffed were running to head us off, shouting something about the Welcher Police, so we went through the door and locked it behind us.

And turned to come face-to-face with a Jack and two large flunkies, dressed with even less sartorial savvy than the multitudes outside. One of the flunkies was my Jack's former guard, and he didn't seem pleased by the reunion.

"Hi, Valerie," the Jack said with the hint of a leer.

"Hi," we said in unison.

And that was when we saw the other Valerie — the first of our dopps that I had encountered, the red-headed waitress.

She gave Edit Val and me each an appraising look. "So one's from Universityverse, and one's from Publishingverse, huh? Tough decision ... but either one is gonna be better than mine, that's for sure!"

We were taken down the corridor and up a flight of stairs and introduced to the room that my Jack had occupied before. Evil Jack and his flunkies came in with us, weapons drawn. This was getting old.

"Now," said Evil Jack. "We can't kill any of you, because we're still working on the correlation of events between universes, and the odds are that it may do damage to your twins elsewhere who are of use to us ..." I could imagine what use they would be, as exchanges for someone who wanted out of a nasty universe. Like Evil Jack, or Red Val ...

But as he spoke, Edit Val huddled close to me again, seemingly in terror. That sort of cowering just wasn't like her. Although I was annoyed when I felt her hand slip into my pocket and grasp the egg, I can't say I was surprised when she pulled away from me, closed her eyes, and disappeared.

Evil Jack was the surprised one — and angry. He ordered that my Jack and I be searched in case there was another one, and as the flunkies came forward, I had no choice: in my other pocket, I pushed the button on the Erase-an-Experience module.

And there we were, in the same room, and the flunkies were standing back beside the Evil Jack, and he was saying, again, "Dammit, where the hell did she get that Hopper? Search the other two, now." I glanced at my Jack, and he wore the same pained expression he had as Edit Val faded. And the flunkies were coming toward us again.

I pushed the button again. It was kind of fun, sort of like using the joystick on a video game and making the little figures move around. But what if the module had drainable batteries?

I had to think of something else. As we looped back the thirtieth time, I said, in unison with the Evil Jack, "Dammit, where the hell did she get that Hopper? Search the other two, now."

Evil Jack and the flunkies were baffled by my inexplicable echo. It was only for a second or two, but it was just as Edit Val reappeared — with the corduroys, wine-jars, bartender, and yet another Jack, this one dressed in jeans, sneakers, a white Oxford shirt, and a gray blazer, whom I took to be her original Edit Jack. They had no trouble subduing our bewildered antagonists.

"What on earth were you doing?" Edit Val said, coming over to me as some of her cohorts were

putting manacles on Evil Jack and his flunkies. "We had the worst time trying to get back here; the Swing refused to put us anywhere close to the room."

Before I could answer, the corduroys returned from a reconnaissance of the adjoining storerooms with a drugged and bedraggled pair: a greasy Jack in short-order-cook whites, who threw his arms around Red Val and begged her never to leave him again; and a Valerie twirling purple-dyed hair, wearing a plaid skirt and a candy-cane blouse, who said she'd give a thousand to one that no one in this room would *believe* what had happened to her.

I shrugged and turned back to Edit Val, showing her the Erase-an-Experience module. "I was using this. It seemed like a good idea at the time."

She looked at the name lasered on the side of the module and whistled. "This thing *worked*? I saw the ad earlier today, but I was sure no one would shell out the money for something so hokey ... Where *did* you get the money?" she added cautiously.

"We'll have to discuss that sometime ..." I began, but then more reinforcements poured in from Edit Val's group. It was time for Jack and me to get back home. We could still make the unveiling ceremony. We had to tell the powers-that-be (tenured professors, in our universe) that they were going to join an interdimensional task force.

"I'll be in touch tomorrow," Edit Val said as we made our way to the nearest Fader, just down the hall; she had entrusted the egg to a technical writer. It took her only moments to figure out the controls, and after a quick good-bye she shut us into two lockers, and we were off.

As Jack and I scrambled out of our own Drop chute and had our obligatory relieved embrace, wild applause erupted from the crowd of officials and supporters gathered in the project room. They thought we had orchestrated this to demonstrate the ITD.

As champagne corks popped, I look up at Jack and said, "Well, I think now I'm qualified to swing Tarzan over every pitfall in that old game of yours."

Jack released me, gazed deep into my eyes, and said, "Val?"

"Yes?" I replied huskily.

"There'll never be another you." □

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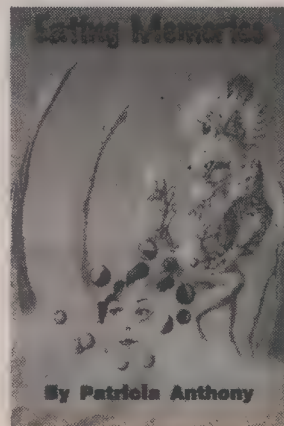
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Beating the Sweeps

By Carrie Martin

Art by Jael

“Don’t go taking no short-cuts.” The old woman’s eyes held his firmly despite his squirming on the chair.

“Lexington ain’t so bad. Rog Carly said —

“Don’t give me no Rog Carly said, boy. You take Bristol.” Her head came down in a sharp nod. “I’m trusting you, Eben.”

His eyes narrowed, still caught, his jaw setting stubbornly. “Half as far by Lexington — them sweepers not likely to wait for stragglers.” He heard the sulky tone in his own voice and wanted to kick himself for it.

She turned away with one of her “that’s settled, then” nods. “Travel light, no dawdling — that beats sweepers. No short-cuts, Eben.”

“Bristol, then.” He was angry, but she’d let his eyes go and he was breathing easier.

“No hitching with quarrellers, neither.” She leaned to tighten the straps on his pack, her touch a caress echoing through the leather bands and vibrating the still air between them. “I seen folks go down fast that way. You remember all I taught you?”

The tinge of anxiety in the question struck at his heart. Tension melted out of his shoulders as love and gratitude sprang up. “I remember.”

She sighed, relieved, and patted his arm. “Set a good pace — don’t go listening to Honey’s crying. Might be a short hot one this year. I seen sweepers back as early as the last of August.” Her mouth set in a grim hard line, the gray eyes glazing over in memory. “Earlier back, the meaner it gets. They always got to make an example of those trying to get to West, but early back means they’re mad getting their own good times cut short, and the killing gets nasty.”

Eben turned, and she lifted the pack, easing it to its place on his back. A sudden welling of tenderness brought tears to his eyes, and he growled, fighting them back. “Them girls is already slowing us down.”

She thumped the pack, straightening her spine and lifting her chin. “Them girls’ll get you in, Eben. Don’t you go forgetting that. West won’t take a man more’n twenty — too likely the sickness gets one older — and he needs a couple females at that. The War left the West shy of women, and they want men willing to fight for the ones they got.” Worry crept into her voice again. “You remember the codes?”

He grinned at her. “Sure I do. Can say it all in

my sleep.”

Her lips tightened. “Go saying it all in your sleep, Eben, and it’ll get stole.”

“I never meant —

She gave one of the smaller packs a shake. “Time now for being serious, Eben. Joke when you’re safe in.”

The blanket at the doorway moved, the girls scampering in. The woman turned, nodding her head in satisfaction at sight of them. Eben stared at their cut-short hair, the reality of what they intended biting into him at last. The taller girl pulled a packet of slips from her pocket, her eyes bright. “She give me forty-eight credits, Grandma — better’n what you said.”

“That’s good, Keely.” The woman took the slips, quickly dividing them. “We’ll scatter these among you. No sense the first thief getting everything.”

The younger child put her thumb in her mouth and Eben snapped, “Ain’t no boy that size ever went sucking on himself, Honey.” She yanked the thumb out, her eyes glistening. “Don’t want you took by pirates,” he muttered as he slipped her small pack over her shoulders.

The blonde head bobbed, accepting his apology, but tears filled her blue eyes. “Why we gotta go by pirates? I’m scared. We could stay home.”

The woman reached to cup the child’s chin in her hand. “Pirates is just bad-tempered greed, Honey. Steal credits or food or pretty girls and don’t mind killing to do it.” She shook her head, her eyes soft as she cast them over the children. “You got my word West is better — plenty of food, chance to work what job you like, learning for any that wants it. It’s more’n that. West was part of Central here before the sickness took over.”

Eben frowned. “You keep saying that. Nobody gets sick in West?”

“Don’t mean that kind of sick, Eben. It’s right for folks to breathe free. Your daddy died trying to keep Central free. The sickness is wanting power over others, and giving up your own choosing. Them troopers kill what they can’t control, and let somebody else tell ’em where and when.” She sighed. “You’ll have to find it out for yourself, Eben, but that won’t happen here.”

“Ain’t nobody bent on killing us here,” grumbled Eben.

“Anybody staying here’s already dead,” mut-



tered the woman. "Off now. Tell Bram I'm thinking next year — ought to find Lacey's two by then."

Eben would have scoffed at that six months earlier — finding anybody east of Emmett was a lunatic's job. But she'd found them, and most of her other grandchildren, in the five years before. He hadn't even realized Keely and Honey were his sisters until she'd shown them how to read the tattoos on the webbing between their toes.

Eben led the way out of the cardboard hut, glad to be leaving before the summer storms began. Now and then a hut got washed right out into the gulf, drowning whoever happened to be inside. He and the girls picked their way over the drunks and druggies lining the alley — this time of morning one could accidentally step on a face and not wake the owner.

Small bands were gathering near the square, wanting to be first up choosing parties when the sirens sounded. That would happen at six, and the State troopers on the square would make a dash for Baxter Avenue, which led to the airlift. The summer months would find them recuperating from ten months of duty, basking on the islands or exploring the southern wilds. The citizenry could indulge in what deviltry it liked, hampered little by the local police. Autumn would bring the troopers back to sweep clean and rule again with an iron fist. They'd be greeted with cheers, the populace sickened enough by sixty days of anarchy to welcome tyranny. Complaints against the system met a quick and ugly death.

A silken thread tickled his ear. "Eben." He turned his head, smiling before he saw her face.

"Hi, Rae." He glanced away, bashful.

She bit her lip. "You going then?"

"Sure. I told you." Eben couldn't think suddenly what to do with his hands.

The girl caught at his elbow, her eyes bright with excitement. "Rog says we'll hit the gates inside a month."

Eben shifted nervously from one foot to the other. "I been thinking, Rae, we oughta take Bristol."

Her face showed surprise, but the sirens prevented her answer as her sister's hand grabbed at her sleeve and pulled her toward the square. Eben was close behind, his hands closed tight on Honey and Keely. He picked a spot twenty feet inside the perimeter and tried to judge the different groups as his grandma had told him.

He liked Sheridan and thought they'd be allowed to join up, but several of his people had carts with them. Travel light, she'd said. Carts slow you down. Takes strength to pull and wheels break. Worse, it lets you think you can't do without things better left behind. He might have picked Earl's group, except he saw Rusty sidling up and getting a nod. He'd never had difficulty with Rusty

himself, but the boy was a quarreller, all right.

He turned at a thump on his shoulder. "Let's go, Eben."

Eben looked up, swallowing hard. "I'm taking Bristol, Rog."

"Who you been listening to?" The smile widened as Rog spread fingers to emphasize a shrug. "Why take twice the time, Eben?"

The younger boy stubbornly set his jaw. "Lexington ain't proved, Rog. You ain't travelled it yourself."

A finger jabbed at Eben's chest. "And you ain't travelled Bristol."

Eben's grip on the girls tightened until Honey squirmed and Keely gave him a poke. "My grandma has — four times."

"Your grandma?" Rog doubled over laughing, turning to shout, his waving arms gathering in listeners. "His grandma been giving him advice." Eben flushed, aware Rae was watching him anxiously. Rog jabbed him again with a rigid forefinger. "Your grandma's an old woman."

Eben swallowed hard, forcing the anger back down his throat. "I'm taking Bristol."

Rog lost his smile as he studied the stubborn face before him. "Do what you like, idiot. I'll wave from the gates as the sweepers get you."

Rog turned away and Rae was at his arm again, crowding Honey against him. "Please, Eben. We decided."

"I promised I'd take Bristol." His tone softened, earnest eyes meeting hers. "Come with us."

"I can't." She looked away. "I counted on you, Eben."

He couldn't remember ever feeling so miserable. "My grandma's been —"

She stamped her foot, angry dark eyes catching his as her head swivelled back around. "Don't care about your old grandma. What's she know, anyway? Lexington's faster." She calmed as his face grew dark, her eyes growing mournful. "Don't you want to come with me, Eben?"

"Promised Bristol." His eyes were pleading. Her mouth set in a tight line and she turned away without another word.

"Excuse me." He turned to look into the face of a boy about his own age. The boy nervously pushed his glasses up with his middle finger. "I hear your grandma done the run before?"

Eben studied him a moment, then nodded. "Four times."

The glasses began to slide down again as soon as his finger left them. "She told you things?"

"Sure."

The boy's mouth curved, trembling with hope. "I got ten — you want to come on?"

Eben remained business-like. "What you carrying?"

"Packs is all — like you."

Eben cast a critical eye over the group — two more boys and seven girls. "Them girls gotta cut their hair first chance. Save getting took from you, maybe."

"All right. I'm Dooz." He pushed at his glasses again, with relief. He'd found something of a guide, and maybe help in time of trouble.

"**T**old you, Dooz — them girls gotta cut their hair."

"Can't force a thing like that, Eben. You know I can't. Got four shaved now — maybe Marla and Dix'll change their minds when it's hotter." Dooz shifted his pack a little, trying to match the taller boy's stride.

Eben snorted. "Or when they get took by pirates."

"We'll keep staying away from the edges like we done already."

"We only been out ten days, Dooz. My grandma says the first's no more'n a party. Hundreds of folk going to West. Pirates don't do more'n fret the edges. But we'll start losing some. Carts'll break, folks'll get tired, bad shoes'll give out. Some'll start quarrelling — we'll have to steer clear of them. Long hair's invitation to trouble."

Dooz gave a heavy sigh. "I'll ask again, but I can't force it, Eben."

"I'm tired, Eben."

"Don't think about it, Honey."

"Can we rest over the river?"

"Nope. Keep moving. That's what beats sweepers."

The girl hung on his arm, sobbing. "You're mean, Eben. Everybody else is stopping. I can't go no further."

Eben continued to walk steadily. "We're moving on, Honey."

Dooz pushed his glasses up, wiping at the sweat beneath the taped plastic bridge. "Wouldn't hurt to stop a day, Eben. Get a bath, rest a little."

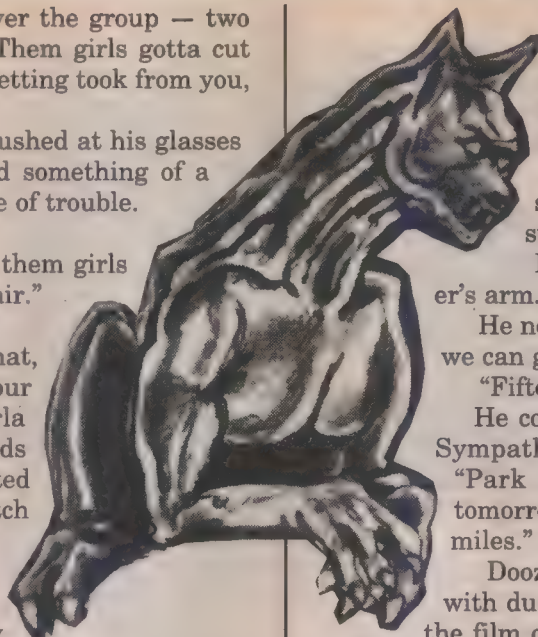
"Do what you like, Dooz. Me and mine are moving on."

Dooz sighed heavily. He'd have crying from his own, but he'd follow Eben all the same.

Two days past the river, the real heat of the summer hit. The air above the ground shimmered, the road ahead steadily promising water that melted away as they approached. "Ain't nothing here," wept Dix. "Can't see no houses any which way. We're lost."

"Ain't lost," said Eben, keeping his stride smooth and even. "Just out of the city is all. Cut your hair, Dix — it's cooler and less to carry."

"Leave my hair be." She rubbed angrily at the tears on her dust-caked face. "I ain't showing up at



West ugly."

Eben's voice was as flat and gray as the dusty land spreading out on either side. "Won't care how you look, Dix."

"Shut up, Eben." Dix was still angry but heat and fatigue stopped her ability to show it.

Keely timidly touched her brother's arm. "Almost out of water, Eben."

He nodded. "Place about fifteen miles we can get more."

"Fifteen miles?"

He could hear the tears in her voice. Sympathy edged the practical tone. "Park out here somewhere — face tomorrow without water. Still fifteen miles."

Dooz swallowed, his throat clogged with dust. He'd given up on his glasses, the film of dust steadily collecting on his lenses blurring his vision more than doing without them. "Heard some say it's better travelling nights, Eben."

Eben shook his head decisively. "Not through here. Snakes out. Ain't got the moon, neither."

"Got light, though."

"It'd be wasting it. We'll travel nights past Ebkirk."

Marla tossed her head, her ponytail flying. "You're making things up, Eben. Don't know nothing."

Eben never broke stride. "Do what you like, Marla. I ain't travelling through snake country at night."

It was nearly dusk when they saw the farmhouse. They were met at the outer fence by a man on a horse. He had a rifle up to his shoulder, aimed at them. He cocked it so they could hear. "Don't even think it," he said. "First foot on my land gets blown off."

"You Deke Jessup?" asked Eben.

"Died two months back."

Eben felt the blood drain from his face. They wouldn't get over the next section of desert without water, and it was a bad place to sleep out in the open. He tried to keep his voice steady. "My grandma told me to ask for Deke. Said he'd give us a place to sleep and some water."

"Told you, he's dead." The rifle stayed trained on Eben's face.

"Got credits to trade."

"Got no use for credits, boy. This ain't the city."

Eben's mind scrambled after his grandmother's hints. "Got something needs doing?"

The aim of the rifle wavered slightly. "I let you on, boy, I'll get overrun. Every damn runner'll think I'm a free hit."

Eben clutched at hope. "Don't plan on telling

nobody."

"Go on now." The voice seemed a shade gentler.

"Must be something you need." The man lowered his sights a good six inches and Eben gave him a slight smile. "What you want?"

The man cleared his throat. "Could use me a female."

"Ain't mine to trade."

"Then get off my land." The man's tone was hard, but he didn't raise the rifle to its previous sharp aim. He'd get what he wanted all right.

Marla threw her hair over her shoulder so he could see it. "What you offering a female?"

He ran his eyes down her, balked in his assessment by her boy's clothes and the dirt of the road covering her. "Depends."

She laughed, her hips swaying. "Could get a better look if you offered baths."

His eyes narrowed. "Ain't meaning to get teased."

She tilted her head and gave him a sly grin. "Teasing ain't bad if it don't last too long."

The rifle dropped another foot, the man licking his lips hungrily. Dooz stepped forward, opening his mouth to protest, then closed it again when Eben's hand gripped his arm hard. Eben leaned to whisper in his ear. "Keely says she been talking of running off — going back or joining another group. Persuading Dix to go with her. She stays here, it's likely no loss, and you won't lose Dix. You still got enough with six." Dooz nodded after a moment and the man kicked his horse forward, reaching to unlatch the gate.

"**W**hy we gotta go around?" whined Honey. "We got credits enough — I want real food."

Eben rubbed a hand wearily across his forehead. "Gotta go through on Bastolt. Fewer pirates and get through in two days 'stead of five or six."

Dix kicked savagely at the gravel covering the road. "You mean desert again in two days 'stead of five or six."

Eben gritted his teeth, sick of Dix's whine, which had increased steadily since leaving a gloating Marla with the grinning farmer. "You don't cut that damn hair you ain't safe on Bastolt neither."

The girl trembled with frustrated rage. "You don't know nothing, Eben. Everybody listening when you don't know nothing. Say we gotta do this and that —"

"Do what you want." Eben grabbed Honey's hand and headed north off the main road. She tugged and cried in protest, Eben giving her a shake. "We're going up Bastolt."

Dix wept impotently as Dooz followed Eben. "I hate you, Eben. I hate you all — just follow along whatever he thinks up." In the end she trailed after them, her tears giving way at last to cold

silence.

A wail went up as they approached Bastolt. A chasm lay between them and Ebbkirk, the Bastolt bridge nothing but a few shredded metal lines hanging over the edge. "Now what?" screamed Dix. "We ain't got time to get back to Rye before dark. You got wings to fly us across there?"

Eben ignored the cries of the others, his eyes searching for the mark his grandma had told him about. He shrugged out of his pack when he saw it and started digging in the sand. Dooz stepped to help him. "What we doing now?"

"Panel with numbers in a box." A couple of the others stopped crying, curiosity overcoming them.

"This it?" asked Keely a few moments later.

Eben nodded happily, brushing the rest of the sand from the top of the box and easing the lid open. He punched the number his grandma had told him into the panel. Nothing happened.

"Is it broken?"

He shook his head, trying another number. Nothing. "It changes. Grandma give me a dozen to try."

"What if none works?"

He ignored the whimpers, continuing to punch in the codes she'd taught him. Something blinked on his eighth try. He grabbed his pack, scrambling away, the others following him. There was a whine coming from beneath the ground, the sand shifting. A moment later a great metal cube rose from the earth, the hum of machinery still audible after it shuddered to a halt.

Eben brushed more sand away from the foot of it, pressing another button. Doors whooshed open and he jumped inside. "Come on."

The others hesitated. Dix found her voice — a frightened whisper. "What is it?"

"Freight elevator." Eben found the button to hold the doors open. "Come on." Keely grabbed Honey's hand and stepped inside, the rest following. Eben punched another button and the doors closed, the box dropping swiftly through the shaft. Eben's stomach seemed to come up through his throat, but he encouraged the others. "Won't hurt you — Grandma says there's lots in West. Don't want to cry and look stupid there."

They were all relieved when the thing stopped and the doors slid open again. Eben had his flashlight ready, the beam darting around the dark tunnel ahead of them. The others quickly got their own lights out, the echoing blackness unnerving them. "Just me and Dooz with lights," said Eben. "Save the rest — might need it later."

They walked in a huddled mass. "How — how long we got to be down here?"

"Couple miles." Eben shivered, dismayed at the sound of his voice echoing through the dark tunnel. "It's blocked further on, or we could go right under the city."

"I like the city, Eben."

Eben sucked in his breath, counting ten before answering, struggling to remain patient. "Pirates is real bad in Ebkirk. Runners gotta go through to get to West, and gotta have females. Grandma says most watch Rye and Jisum, but Bastolt ain't entire safe neither. We stay down here tonight, then two days up to get through."

"We gotta stay down here all night?" The wail was joined by whimpers.

"Good safe place further on. Get you food, too." A small dark shadow darted ahead of them and screams echoed up and down the corridor.

"Just rats — better'n pirates," said Eben, though he could feel his own heart pounding in his chest.

They reached the blocked off end — a pile of rubble created by a bomb of long ago. Eben led them through a smaller tunnel to the right that quickly dead-ended. A moment's searching found the panel his grandmother had told him about and he pried it open. He had to try eleven of the fifteen combinations she'd given him before the click told him the door would open. It gave a protesting screech and would only open halfway, but it was enough. The dozen children scrambled inside, relieved to be away from the rats.

The lights on the ceiling were half out, the remaining ones flickering, but they found it comforting. Eben pulled the door closed and shrugged out of his pack. "Settle down — be back soon." He went through another door and the others gratefully sank to the cement floor, Keely marking a spot for her brother. It was cramped, but they felt safe.

Eben returned an hour later, the smell from the bags he carried bringing the children eagerly to their feet, their stomachs growling. They feasted on roast chicken, sausages, fried bread and fresh fruit. He'd even found a vendor selling chocolate milk.

"How'd you get so much?" asked Dooz, biting into an apple and rolling his eyes in delight. "Everybody said Ebkirk food cost ten times what you'd expect."

Eben nodded, saving his answer until he'd finished the succulent mouthful of chicken. "Does over on Rye and thereabouts. Runners'll pay anything for what ain't been carried a month. Don't expect runners on Bastolt, so prices is more regu-

lar."

Eben settled his group into a corner beside the stone stairs of a trooper building, now empty.

"You sure?" asked Dooz nervously.

"No troopers here now. Pirates is our worry."

The children sank down wearily. They'd been robbed twice during the day and once had to run from a gang of boys pelting them with rocks. Dix had steadfastly refused to cut her hair and that's what worried Eben most. He put his back firmly against the wall, his hand near the side pouch of his pack. He let his grandma's lessons and his hours of mental practice go through his mind again, hoping he wouldn't need the skill she'd taught him. The others fell asleep quickly, Eben going over and over her instructions in his mind. Arms straight, one hand supporting the other. Aim center of head, squeeze. Don't think about it until they were safe.

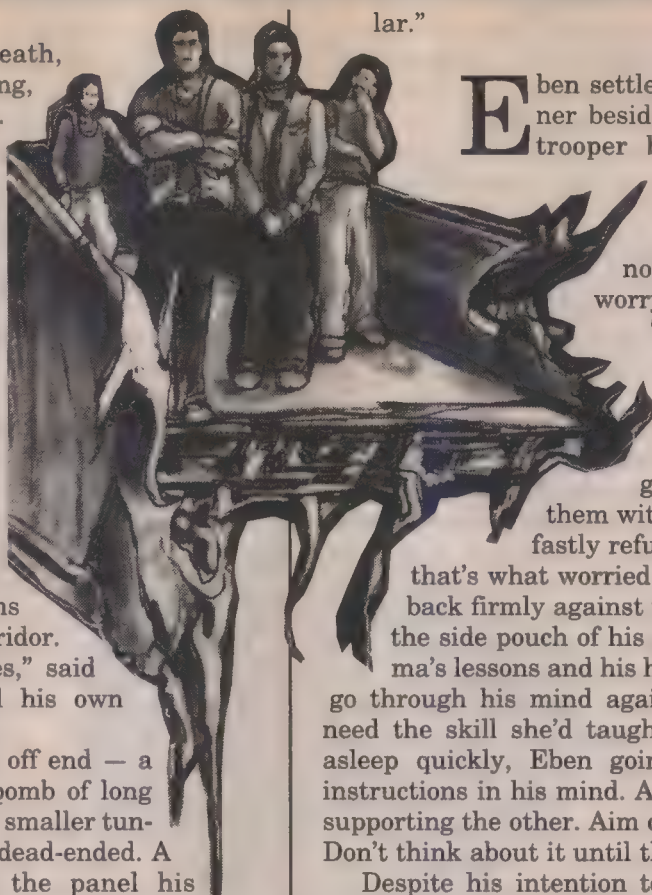
Despite his intention to remain awake, Eben was beginning to doze when the attack came. He fought the impulse to jump to his feet as the others did, reaching for the gun and stabilizing his body against the building, bracing himself with his feet. He aimed at the nose of the man with his arm around Honey's neck. Squeeze. The head whipped back, blood spurting. The ear of the pirate with his hand wound through Dix's hair. Squeeze. There was a sharp crack as the man fell, dragging Dix to the sidewalk with him. Eben never heard it, his ears ringing with the repeated roaring of the gun. Aim at the open mouth of the one charging him, knife drawn. Squeeze. Eyes glazing as the mouth vomited blood. Squeeze. Squeeze. The pirates fled, Eben's last squeeze stopping one in mid-flight, the body crumpling almost comically to the pavement.

Don't think about it. He heard his grandma's voice in his ear, felt her shake him. He reached into the pouch of his pack, quickly reloading the gun. "Quick — we gotta move. Them pirates'll be back with more."

Dooz was kneeling over Dix. He looked up, his glasses sitting almost sideways on his face. "Her neck's broke, Eben."

"Can't do nothing now, Dooz. Got to move." He herded the group into the street, surprised by their quiet docility. They'd gone nearly half a mile before the first one gasped and threw up.

The sky was lightening when they reached the outskirts of the city. The crying had stopped an



hour before, everyone too tired to do more than put one foot in front of the other. Eben suspected some of the things he was seeing weren't real and looked almost frantically for the train wreck his grandma had told him about. "There," he said triumphantly, pointing to the chain of twisted metal half buried in the sand.

They found a car with seats still inside, having somehow escaped the fire that had blackened everything else. It was standing nearly on end, three quarters underground. "Climb to the bottom — it'll be cooler there. Sleep on the backs of the seats."

Eben waited until they'd climbed in, then sat outside watching the sun rise, sobs climbing his throat. They were pirates, and if he hadn't shot them, they'd have murdered the boys and done worse to the girls. It wasn't as though he'd never seen violence — he'd grown up in it. But he'd never killed anyone before, and he felt as violated as if the bullets had entered his own body and blown him apart. He'd been eager for manhood — this was it, and he wept and choked on the bitter knowledge he couldn't give back.

They travelled at night through the desert between Ebkirk and Emmett, the exhausted children needing little persuasion to add the extra miles entailed by the safer route on the south side. Eben had expected to be challenged at West for their lack of a female, but it seemed everyone was allowed into the large camp past the West gates. They were given a number and must wait their turn to be examined. Those who failed to gain entrance would be returned to the outside, a dangerous possibility, since the troopers were certain to be back by then.

"I been all around, Keely. Ain't nobody but us from so far away." Eben felt chilled inside despite the burning summer sun.

The girl looked up in surprise. "What you saying, Eben? Rog Carly said —"

"Rog Carly ain't made it here. Man told me Lexington runs past Mopher — road between there and Emmett's half gone. Man had a map, Keely — I seen it ain't much less in miles up Lexington and no road through bad desert."

Keely felt stunned. "They — they got time, Eben."

Eben looked away, afraid to meet her eyes. "We're a female short, Keely. One of Dooz's boys'll get thrown to the sweepers we don't get another. I'm going after Rae."

Eben headed for the north end of Emmett, the map he'd seen showing the Mopher road coming from the north. He stopped, feeling his grandma's hand firm against his chest. No short-cuts, Eben. It was a struggle. Going around the south might add a week all told. After a moment's hesitation,

he turned south.

He travelled at night, making far better time alone than he had with his group. He saw Carly's fire just after midnight ten days after leaving the West camp. They were sleeping without a watch. He located Rae and crept up, putting a firm hand over her mouth, whispering into her ear as she struggled awake. "It's me, Rae. Eben."

She turned amazed eyes to him and he released her. "Eben! Where'd you come from?"

His fingers wandered to the wisps of hair clinging to her forehead. "Worried when I got to West and you wasn't there, Rae. Come with me now."

Her face crumpled and he saw the lines of fatigue even by the dim light of the fire. "We got time to rest, Eben. Can't go no further."

Alarm bit into him. He struggled to remain calm. "Ain't got time, Rae. Come with me."

"No, I can't — " He leaned his mouth to hers, pouring his feelings in with abandon. He stopped when he felt the change in her. "My — my sister, Eben."

"Wake her. I'll wait behind them rocks over there."

"How long now?"

Eben's eyes remained fixed on Rae's sleeping face. He was having to carry her part of the time, and it helped to drink her in when they stopped to rest. "Few days. We got to go around the south end, Ju." The girl gave a shuddering sigh but didn't complain. He glanced up at her. "Surprised me you letting Rae persuade you so quick."

She ground her teeth. "Bad business from the start, Eben. My Jarrel having words with Rog first day out. Lost some to pirates in Mopher and Rog left the youngest behind — said they slowed us. Me'n Rae cut our hair then — remembered your sisters. Road was out and Jarrel said leave the carts. Rog said no. Plenty of time, he said. Few days later Jarrel said him and me and Rae were going on — couldn't keep digging broken carts out." The girl breathed hard, the muscles in her jaw hard tight lines. "Rog killed him." Eben met her eyes, the hollow depths shaking him. His own experience with pirates became a shallow shattering by comparison, and he gained his first glimpse of what his grandma had said about the sickness. No matter how right he'd ever felt himself to be, he couldn't see using that kind of force. Ju's voice was a low and lethal growl. "I hope them sweepers gets him, Eben."

Eben figured she likely got her wish. The sweepers were back early, like his grandma'd predicted — Eben had Rae and Ju in the West camp with less than ten hours to spare before the troopers reached the south side of Emmett. They'd begun sweeping the north six days earlier. □

How Deep Does It Get ...?

"Mr. Publisher? Mr. Alien Publisher?"
 "Um. I guess you could call me that. Could you tell me how you got in here?"

"We just have a few questions, Mr. Publisher."

"Ryan told me never to answer the door. Why didn't I —"

"What was that, Mr. Publisher?"

"Nothing. I was talking to myself."

"I see. You do a lot of that sort of thing, Mr. Publisher?"

"You all alone here, Mr. Publisher?"

"Well, I don't know, you see —"

"I'm afraid you don't need to know."

"Come on now, 23, we don't need to be hostile. We're just here to ask Publisher a few friendly questions ..."

"Yeah. Friendly questions. About certain irregularities we've discovered. My partner here, F7A, is a bit too polite to people with *irregularities*."

"23? F7A? What kind of —"

"Like I said, this interview is being held on a need-to-know basis, Publisher. And you don't need to know."

"Now, to the facts. Just what kind of name is 'Alien,' anyway?"

"One of those made-up-names? Like Oprah or Cher?"

"Variant spelling, probably. I had an uncle named Al."

"Need to know, 23."

"Sorry, F7A."

"But wait. I —"

"Not answering the questions? Publisher's gonna be a hard-ass!"

"F7A doesn't like hard-asses. I'm telling you this, Publisher, for your own good."

"But —"

"Maybe Publisher doesn't believe we're for real. Maybe he wants to see some identification. Pull them out, 23!"

"But —"

"See, Publisher? All nice and official. Rest assured, these blank badges are as official as you can get. If you had a high enough clearance, you'd be amazed at what it said on our *real* badges!"

"Need to know, 23!"

"Hey, we have to tell him *something*, F7A. Otherwise, how can we determine if he's involved in the conspiracy?"

"We are *all* involved, Publisher. It just depends how deeply he goes."

"But —"

"Don't deny it, Publisher! You see, we've been reading your column!"

"..."

"That got him! He's speechless."

"That's right. We *were* reading science fiction magazines."

"Yeah. We know what you're



thinking. *No one* reads science fiction magazines."

"Yeah, F7A. Generally it is true that no one pays any attention to science fiction magazines whatsoever."

"But see? That's why we read them! We know where the conspiracies really are! Forget *The X-Files*, all those big Hollywood projects! The real conspiracies are in the places *nobody* looks!"

"It is for that very reason that we sought you out. It's you, Al. We know it already. You're the source of it all."

"But —"

"No use denying it, Al. We're experienced in conspiracies. And you look like a conspirator if I've ever seen

one!"

"Now, F7A. Remember our directive."

"No, 23. Get a gander at him up close. Doesn't he look a little pale? And look at the shape of those eyes. He may not be from around here."

"F7A! Everybody's equal in America, so long as they stay in line. And don't get involved in conspiracies!"

"So you're going to mollycoddle another perpetrator, 23? Now that I think about it, I'm not too sure about you!"

"You worried about the shape of my eyes, 23? How could you tell?"

We never do take off our dark glasses, do we?"

"That's it, 23! You're talking far too much! We're here to grill Publisher, not air our dirty laundry!"

"As if anyone would believe where our funding came from!"

As if anyone would ever put Wal-Mart, campaign financing, and unredeemed soft-drink containers in the same sentence!"

"That's it, 23! Outside, now!"

"Yeah. F7A, I've wanted to know your part in the conspiracy for a long time. Maybe it's time to beat it out of you!"

"Need to know, 23. But we're not forgetting about *you*, Publisher!"

"But —"

"Enough, Al! F7A wouldn't know the truth if it flew down on a UFO!"

"Out of here, 23!"

"After you, F7A!"

"Remember, Publisher, we've noticed you. We'll be watching you from now on!"

"Hell, F7A, we're watching *everybody*!"

"Don't listen to him, Publisher!"

"But —"

"And remember, this conversation never happened. If you tell another soul, you'll be in real trouble!"

"Hell, F7A, what's he gonna do? Print our conversation in a science fiction magazine?"

"Yeah, I guess you're right, 23. Who's going to read that sort of nonsense?" □

Tryst

By Janis O'Connor

Art by Jael

"Identify."

"Mamatouf Jones, damn it. I live here. Floor one-nine-five, Bide-a-While Wing, Bedwomb G forty-two. Mamatouf. Jones. Remember? And where's your 'please'?" She glared at the sentry dot, a glowing red eye in the polished plasteel door. "Did your manners get erased with your memory?"

A whisper overhead caught her attention. She glanced up as a set of stunners retreated into a niche in the paneling.

"Eeeh." Mamatouf paled. "When was your last checkup?"

"I am seventy days overdue for rehab, Ms. Jones."

"Figures." She gave another uneasy glance overhead and looked back at the door.

An advert reflected from the wall behind murmured about a new holovironment: "Thrill to the fires of passion in freefall ..."

She stood fist to hip before it in the blurred sheen of the door. Booted, gloved, jumpsuited, air helmet in hand, she was an unenhanced portrait of nervous impatience in the form of a reasonably attractive, reasonably young ... adventuress. Yes! Her smile flashed back at her. Adventuress. Naughty. Daring. Caution and convention be trashed. She cocked her head. "So now that you know me, when are you going to open the door?"

A thick-sided bin rumbled from the wall as the sentry hummed and spoke again. Its precorded voicebox managed to sound aggrieved. "Official warning, Ms. Jones. This is a comfort-safe dwelling floor. Please deposit all weapons in the chute provided. Your property will be returned upon exiting the zone."

Mamatouf sighed. "You should have done this before aiming the armament at me. If that kid down on one-seventy managed to access security again, I swear I'll ..."

"Weapons, please."

"I have no weapons, you binary Bozo!" Down the hall, a man whose sentry was evidently without problems glanced toward her and hurriedly entered his living space. Adverts around him faded to grey as motion ceased in his end of the corridor.

"Detectors indicate pointed metal object on your person. Do you refuse to deposit your weapons in the chute provided?"

"Uh, no. Park your pixels. I'll look." Mamatouf checked the overhead niche. No movement, but the panel hadn't closed over its stunners, either. She touched a combination of colors at the waistband of her side pack. As its seal eased open, she frowned

and pulled out a plastic bag. She reached in, rummaged past tissue and gingerly, with two fingers, withdrew a nail file. "This? Damn it, it's not ... Oh, hell. Take it. And be careful; it's antique Revlon. Anything happens to it and I'll personally pry you out of the door and feed you to the acid pits." She laid the file in the bin, which rolled closed.

"Thank you. Weapons will be returned ..."

"I know, I know. You going to open the door?" Before her, her image swung silently away. "About time."

Muttering, Mamatouf marched into a smooth, pink passage, unadorned except for a recessed case that lit as she stopped by it. A large, heavy, antique dictionary of bound paper lay open on the lowest shelf. A line of other actual books took up the shelf above it. Small objects rested on the third and top shelf; among them, a very old metal key on a ribbon with a card. She picked it up and read: "For one who dares, anything is possible. Studmuffin." She smiled and put it down, slipped off her boots, picked them up, and entered her bedwomb.

The rounded room lit pink, shimmered, and brightened to white clouds passing shadows over an apple orchard in bloom. Petals shivered in a light breeze and scattered on moss underfoot. A foraging robin found a worm and flew up to a hole in a tree. Parked to the side was a square-nosed Chevy truck half stacked with wooden apple boxes. Low music from its cab moored, "Mmmlove me tender ..."

Mamatouf looked around at the illusion critically. She'd hesitated this morning between programming a mid-twentieth century orchard or a Victorian brothel. Both were wildly sentimental, but so, in a way, was the occasion she'd created them for.

She inhaled the fresh scent and nodded in satisfaction. She'd keep the orchard. She hoped Studmuffin would like the place. Grade BBB, two ratings up from her last digs, bought when the option on her newest word game had been picked up by the holo nets. The sims were all ultra sensory: even without her control bracelet on, the soft carpet suggested moss underfoot. A strand of her hair lifted in the ventilator's light breeze. Her treadmill, gourmetizer, and various nozzles and suctioners in the ovate walls were discreetly hidden within the patterns of the scene.

The only break in the illusion was a blurred block of symmetrical lines opposite the entrance. Her building was just old enough for windows. She could, if she wanted, let in a wedge of sunlight. Filtered, of course. Mamatouf wasn't rash enough to face raw



ultraviolet, but a private piece of natural light gave her cachet on the Meetum channels. She'd blocked the window to prevent interference with the holos and then, quixotically, run drapes over it as if she lived three-quarters of a century earlier. If the folds interfered, too bad. The window had started this afternoon's venture.

As she stepped in, a man in a plum-colored body-suit walked from behind a tree, said, "Call me," blew a kiss, and vanished. She waited a second, but there were no other messages.

She said, "Table." A section of moss rose by the window, shimmered, and became a plain wooden table with a red checkered tablecloth. She tossed her bag and sidepack onto it, turned, said, "Sterilizer," and began to shed her clothes and drop them along with her boots into a bin that slid out from the wall. She turned back, said, "Shield outview Calico Security."

On the moss appeared a chunky dog with a face like a collapsed tire with teeth. An English bulldog, she believed. It looked up at her gravely, drooled, and spoke. "Errrr, you need?"

Mamatouf grinned. Security prided itself on responding with an appropriate image to shielded calls. She'd projected a puss cat, herself. "Glad to see you folks are on the ball. Wish you'd be as quick to check my sentry."

"There's a problem?"

"You might say. It nearly snuffed me for bringing in an antique nail file. Says it's way overdue for a checkup."

The bulldog shook its head. Spittle sprayed from its jowls. "Our records show your unit was serviced on schedule, but we'll take care of it. You're down the list, though. We have glitches on one-seventy, one-o-one and fifty-two ..."

"One-seventy? Hah!"

"No juvenile pranks this time, we think," the bulldog said smoothly. "Downsider break-ins on the sub levels have set the sentry dots on high alert. But we'll get to you, Ms. Jones."

"Sooner the better, 'kay? I'm expecting a visitor."

If security was surprised, the bulldog didn't show it. It stood, shook itself all over, and disappeared.

With the last of her clothes shed, Mamatouf stepped onto what looked like a flagstone and said, "Water shower." A clear tube rose around her. Jets misted her. After a few moments, she spoke again. "Shield outview Junebride. Kingston."

The plum-suited man reappeared, this time holding a stemmed glass as he relaxed in what Mamatouf's holos interpreted as a lawn swing. He was handsome, of course, or at least his image was. Mamatouf had no idea what any of her friends looked like behind their projections, but he'd at least been consistent. For the ten years she'd known him, he'd worn the same saturnine face, had even allowed a touch of aging at the corners of his eyes. There was a good chance he projected his own true view, and it was one of the reasons Mamatouf kept coming back to him. He had a kind of fatalistic honesty she liked.

He burst out laughing. "No! Oh, love, too much. A wedding gown? What a picture."

Mamatouf made a face. He'd see that, though the rest of her head would appear dry with a tiara of white flowers, and her body would be seated demurely on an iron bench. "Thanks a heap, Kingston. No compliments on my gown, much less the pretty figure in it. No good wishes ... I'd have thought my longest-running lovmate might give me a little support today."

"Pure pique, I assure you, Touffer. God knows I'm the first to agree that variety is the spice, but you could have at least invited me before you asked this Studmuffin whoever."

Mamatouf shivered with pleasure as dry jets whiffed over her skin. "Right. And what would your answer have been?"

Kingston set down his glass. A tree stump rose to accept it. "I'd have talked you out of it in the way you know best." His suit vanished. His long, lean body glowed with a perfect all-over tan.

Mamatouf closed her eyes. "I'm ignoring you," she said loftily. She rotated slowly in the jets, not caring that her head twirled on her seated Junebride image like an exorcism gone awry. "Listen, Kingston, I know what you're trying to do, and you're a dear to ride to the rescue, you really are. But no save needed. I want to see what it's like."

"Well, then. See?"

She opened her eyes and laughed. "Get that thing down to size. And take that tulip off the end of it and dress yourself, please. I have a favor to ask of you, and I can't talk to a guy whose dork dwarfs the codpiece of Henry the Eighth."

Kingston chuckled. "What else can a man do when faced with such a virginal challenge? Snow white gown, breasts delicately swelling under lace ..." he sniffed. "And what's that scent along with the apple blossoms? Lilacs? Something musky underneath? Whoo! Pheromones call. Fairly bellow, actually. Sure you don't want to connect your sims before talking?"

"No. Now, behave."

Still grinning, Kingston corrected his image, but his suit went back on as if it were being painted simultaneously from throat and feet to meet ever so slowly at the crotch. The tulip shot to the air and spiraled gently down to the moss.

"Kingston, this is serious."

He nodded. "I know it is." He picked up the glass again. "If you're not just teasing us all, you're about to have actual, body to body —" he waved his free hand, "on body, in body — man beast, earth woman sex. Naturally, your friends are concerned. Not to mention disgusted and titillated."

Mamatouf stepped from the spa and picked up the bag from the table. A soft, tissue bundle fell out. She slanted a glance at him. "So? It's not so odd as all that. Downsiders still do it in person. They do it all the time."

"Oh, great. Downsiders also get AIDS Complex III. Want to let one of them breathe flu on you, while

you're at it? Tuberculosis? Typhoid fever? They swap those all the time, too. It's better than war at keeping down the population. This is the post-antibiotic era, woman, remember? You can suffer and die from any kind of contact. Which reminds me," he set down his glass, "is pain what's missing in our sex games? It's not my cup, sweetie, but I can dial you a guy ..."

"You're a sport, but no, thanks." She opened the tissue and picked up a shiny wisp of a garment in pale peach.

"Well, you obviously have some kind of death wish."

"No. I just — I don't know. Hell. Not pain, exactly. An imperfection wish, maybe. Damn it, Kingston, you're always a perfect lover. Holotales don't do it better." She shook her head, gave a little laugh, and lowered her eyelids and voice to mimic the superheated murmur of a holotale star. "Your lips move on me, warm and moist and urgent. Your tongue wakes my skin, demands the secrets of my mouth, promises pleasure to come. Your hands hold me in a prison of fulfillment ..." She looked at him, shrugged, and gave up the mock voice. "It's always marvelous with you."

Kingston drawled cowboy fashion, "Thank you, ma'am. I'd say, 'tain't nothin,' but I have a feeling you're about to say that for me. So? Where'd I go wrong?"

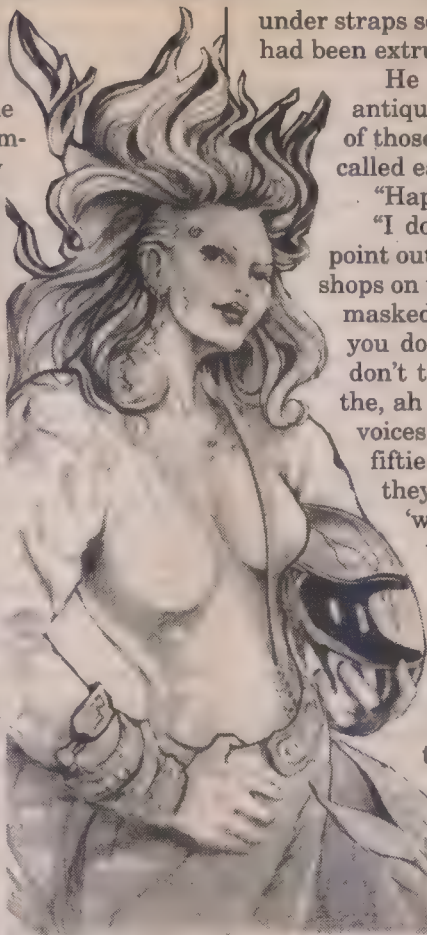
Mamatouf put out her hand in a quick, reflexive gesture he couldn't see. "You didn't. You haven't. You don't. But Kingston, we never get to each other! You're in your bedwomb when you make love to me; I'm in mine. We make love to sims and holos. We might as well be using a dildo."

"Dil what?"

Mamatouf looked down at the wisp in her hand, shook it out and stepped into it, wriggling as she drew it up. "An artificial — well, my prize antique says 'penis,' but think 'love maker' and it'll work both ways. I want to see for myself what it's like to touch someone. Does it still work if you don't do everything right? Can you care for each other when you find physical flaws? Can you talk about your most secret dreams when you're bare-faced, bare-assed there and can't get away?" She flashed him a quick glance. "I don't want to hide in a scene. I want to hand a guy a gift, not just send it." She grimaced. "Of course, my sentry spoiled that for me today."

"Oh?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. An overzealous weapons check. Kingston, I want to get close to someone. I want ... I want a date." She slid her arms



under straps so thin and round they looked as if they had been extruded.

He groaned. "A date. You and your antiques. Were you scuzzing around in one of those lower level junk shops again when I called earlier?"

"Happens yes. So?"

"I don't suppose it would do any good to point out that there are perfectly good antique shops on the holo nets, and you don't have to go masked and armed to shop them. By the way, you don't want a date. You want a tryst. I don't think people did sex on dates back in the, ah —" he glanced at the truck. Agonized voices sang about an earth angel. "— the fifties? If I remember my social sci right, they only kissed on dates. Then they 'went steady' and teased each other unmercifully. For real sex they had to get 'engaged.' Or have a tryst."

"Okay. So I want a tryst. I want two people to actually, physically meet without masks or protective gear, and breathe on each other with real breath and talk without any way to pretend what they are, and anything can happen. I mean, I don't know who anyone really is. Do you? No, wait a minute before you answer. I want to show you something. I need your opinion. I need — um. Kingston —" She flexed her fingers. "Oh, hell. If I can trust a stranger to see the real me, I can trust you. True outview." She paused for the holo to fade from the Junebride illusion. Her fingers flexed several more times. She noticed and held them steady. But she shifted feet. "How do I look?"

Kingston whistled. "That's really you? Uh, 'scuze the question, but you startled me. You look wonderful. And that thing you're wearing is real? What is it?"

Her giggle sounded too high to her own ears. "A weapon my sentry dot missed. An antique 'teddy.' Genuine polyester satin. Sterilized, redyed and, and —" she drew a deep breath and puffed it out, shrugging as if her shoulders worked her lungs. "You really like it? It's all right, then?"

His voice sounded faint. "Sensational."

"Should I reshield? I just wanted a friend's opinion. I didn't mean to tease you. Oh, hell. That's a lie. I did, too. I guess I had to prove myself. I'm sorry, Kingston. I'm nervous. I'm talking too much. Hell. I'll reshield. Hell."

"Hey, hey, hey." Kingston stood. He stepped to within arm's length of her and looked down into her eyes. "Change clothes view if you like, but don't reshield. Put on your sims. You need a hug. I promise I'll be avuncular. You can be avautular." He watched for her smile. "What does your dictionary have for the feminine of avuncular, anyway?"

She looked away, laughed sheepishly, looked

back. "Happens I did look it up once. 'Amateur.' From the days when all kinds of words kept women in their place. So before you say it, not all things antique are wonderful." She paused. "Okay." She turned, stepped to the truck door and raised her hand. The window rolled down. A voice thick as fried mush sang, "Ah found mah threeill ..." She reached inside, "own blueberry heeill ..." lifted out a patterned band, clasped it to her wrist. She touched several colors on it and turned back.

"Better," said Kingston. "Nice, normal jumpsuit. And you still look pretty." He put an arm around her and kissed her forehead when she hugged him back. "Shall we walk through your orchard?"

"Right." The holos blurred and the warmth of Kingston's hug cooled for a moment as they stepped to their separate floor treadmills. Warmth returned as the illusion reasserted seamlessly. Arm in arm they began to stroll. The music retreated behind them.

"So who is this guy? Studmuffin. Subtle he ain't. What do you know about him? Are you in love with him?" Kingston's tone was, as pledged, protective and unthreatening as an uncle's, except for a frisson of jealousy that wasn't entirely unwelcome.

Mamatouf reached to a low-hanging branch, broke off a twig full of blossoms; and held it to her nose. "Love. Well. Studmuffin's just someone on the Meetums. A trend calculator for Stimu-Pop. But he has a window, too. And a collection of antique metal keys. And a taste for adventure. Says he actually opened his window once."

"God. And he's still around to talk about it?"

She laughed. "Says he wanted to see down. He slathered himself with chembloc, put on his breathing helmet, and took a quick peek. Saw nothing but smog, of course. Sat in his helmet for half an hour while the vents cleared his room. But he didn't count on outside air griming his space. The fabrics were spoiled, and his holovision was amazingly mucked up. What with the filth and the thought of airborne diseases, he had his whole bedwomb redone." She caught her breath as a pair of pheasants burst from the underbrush, beating the air furiously in a quick flight through the trees.

Kingston watched them appreciatively. "Uh-huh. Expensive experiment. Who's going to pay the cost of his next adventure?"

Mamatouf disengaged her arm and turned to face him. "If you're going to lecture, I'll turn you off." She glared at him a moment, then put a fist on his chest. "Sorry. I just ... See? This is what I meant. We don't face each other and have it out. We just make anything unpleasant disappear. Kingston, haven't you ever thought something was missing in that? I mean, what if there's more than what the sims give us? Or even less? Wouldn't you like to find out on your own?"

He looked off to where the orchard rose over a gentle hill. A dog barked in the distance. He sighed. "I did find out on my own."

"You did? You did?"

His eyebrows rose.

"Well, don't look hurt. You've been doing your best to remind me that no sane citizen faces another without full body protection. Why didn't you tell me?"

"A man doesn't like to talk about love games with less than triumphant endings."

"Oh." She looked at him doubtfully. "I don't know whether to be sympathetic or suspicious. This story has to have a moral I don't want to hear."

"Probably."

"Thought so." Two hummingbirds flashed iridescence as one chased the other. "But go ahead, anyway. You've confessed the worst. I might as well have the details. Only thing is," she gestured toward the shadows lengthening on the ground, "Studmuffin should be here any minute."

"Kay. I'll be brief." He started walking again; Mamatouf took a quick step to catch up with him. "She was from one of the lower floors; said she had some Downsider friends and was curious but too scared to sleep with one." Mamatouf took his arm; he absently covered her hand with his. "Except for a few surprises like underarm hair, she looked reasonably like her holo. Her breath, while not the ideal my sims provide, was unobjectionable. I'd brought a pocket medi-bot and her health data was in order; she passed screening for all standard transmittable diseases, and she demanded and got the same screening from me."

They were passing through an older part of the orchard. The trees grew thicker in the bole and gnarled; mushrooms clustered between their knees.

"Nothing was terribly wrong. But. We put our hands on each other and our clothes stayed put. We had to stop and physically take them off. We lay down side by side. Our arms on the down side got in the way. I accidentally leaned on her hair and pulled some out. She screamed." He made a face. "And I missed the sims. Her skin was silent when I stroked it, no music at all, and it tasted only of salt. I kept waiting for her nipples and pubic hair to change color, and of course, they never did. The ripe, ammoniac smell of sex was still there — I guess that's natural — but a little more sour than usual and missing the spice I find particularly, well, stimulating."

Around a curve in the path a dead tree trunk lay across their way. He started to climb over it, did a double take, and squinted an accusing eye at her.

"What?" Mamatouf looked back at him and then down at the dead log. "Oh. Coincidence."

"You wanted to hear this."

"No, really. This scene is pre-programmed. The dead log's for sitting. Or lying down on. Whatever." She laughed. "You know I haven't touched my wrist."

He waited.

"Oh, come on. Were you that bad? I don't believe it."

He sighed and relented. "Almost. But I'm going to tell you anyway. I think." He climbed over the log and joined her. They walked in silence for a while.

At the top of a rise the orchard ended at a pasture dotted with dark-eyed yellow flowers. Hereford cows looked up, chewing.

Kingston picked a blade of grass as they stepped into the sun. As if there had never been a break, he said, "I kept thinking about disease. She confessed to worrying about uterine pregnancy. Said she didn't want to be a human lab bottle. We kept at it, but somehow, it all seemed awkward and mechanical. It was work!"

Mamatouf nodded. "I see. Wasn't there anything you liked?"

"It was a satisfactory climax for me, finally, but nothing extraordinary. We thanked each other, and she left. Neither of us has called the other since."

"Oh," said Mamatouf. A cow stood placidly as they walked up to it. Mamatouf patted its rump. Behind the scent of sweet green grass was a faintly pungent aroma she thought might be cow dung. It was earthy but not unpleasant. Nothing was ever unpleasant in a bedwomb. "You didn't try to talk or anything? Shared disasters bring people together, too — or so I've heard. You didn't feel any closer? That was all?"

"More than all. We hardly talked. And." He examined the blade of grass. "I had the odd feeling that she moaned more from manners than passion."

Her eyes widened. "Really?"

"It was real and nothing ever felt more false. I couldn't wait to get back to you."

She said again, softer, "Really?"

"I care a lot for you, Touffer. In spite of your talk, talk, talk." He ducked her arm punch and laughed. "Maybe even because of it."

"Damn it, Kingston. If you'd said this before, maybe I wouldn't go looking for someone else on the Meetums. If you can't get any closer when you're face to face, why bother?"

A bulldog coughed in front of them. Mamatouf and Kingston looked down. Its head slunk so low its jowls nearly disappeared in the grass. A sad red semicircle hung below the whites of its eyes. It said, "Ms. Jones, the visitor you were expecting has, errrrr, had an unfortunate accident. It seems he was carrying a small, pointed metal object that escaped the detectors at check-in. Your sentry did detect it and, errrrr, over-reacted."

"No!" Mamatouf swiveled toward the entry.

"He's not there." The bulldog's outlandishly furrowed head hung lower. "Medicorps has taken him to Emergency for possible resuscitation."

"I'll call his room." Mamatouf turned distractedly.

"No visitors." The bulldog's forelegs slid to the ground, cradled its nose. "Sorry, Ms. Jones." It blinked mournfully up at her and faded to nothing.

"I'm truly sorry, Touffer." Kingston said and opened his arms.

She moved into them, let him hold her, said in a small, strangled voice, "It's my fault. I lured him here."

"Wrong. He wanted to be lured. And you can't

help a sentry on the fritz." Kingston touched his wrist. "There is hope for him, you know. He may still recover."

The orchard faded to a golden haze. Persimmon streaked a low layer of clouds. Others lit cerise. Below, waves crashed against a cliff cupping a bay. Mamatouf tasted salt spray, smelled wet, pungent herbs along a pathway that wound before them to a headland. On its point rose an onion-domed gazebo piled with pillows. Their stripes outrivaled the colors of the sky.

Kingston gently massaged her neck. "The spirit of adventure should be rewarded, Touffer, not punished. It was a freak accident, and it's too damn bad." A pair of gulls flew overhead, calling. He held her and watched a line of purple bloom slowly in the sky. "Would you like me to run through a medi-bot check and come over?"

For a moment Mamatouf held still. Then she leaned back in his arms. "You'd do that? For me?"

"It won't be champagne skin and psychedelics, and for sure I won't bring you any presents more solid than the family jewels, but what the hell. Yeah."

Mamatouf closed her eyes and sighed.

He squeezed her arm. "Keep that teddy on. It'll take me a while to suit up for the trip, but —

"No."

"What?"

Mamatouf opened her eyes. "You want to. That's enough."

Kingston frowned down at her. "You went to a great deal of trouble to get a guy there."

"I know. I feel so terrible about him my stomach hurts. But I can't do anything for him but feel bad."

"Touffer ..."

"We talk, you and I. I've never felt closer to anyone."

"Touffer, I'll come there. Really. I want to."

"Shh."

She took his hand and pulled him gently along the cliff path. As they neared the gazebo, their clothes melted to nothing. Around them rose the sweet song of violins and the faint scent of something musky. Far beyond, the sun set. Beautifully. □

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I Wanna Be in Movies



A few years ago on TV, David Copperfield performed a clever variation on a Harry Blackstone, Sr., trick in which the magician interacts with a person in a film who, at the climax of the illusion, miraculously steps down from the screen and onto the stage ... an effect reminiscent of Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), a romance about a movie actor who quits the picture he's in to meet a woman in the audience with a crush on him.

The idea that movies might work like Alice's looking glass is enticing; if the actors could emerge from them, maybe we could also go inside. Think of it ... an opportunity to meet Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, or to visit Oz (after the Wicked Witch of the West is dead, of course), or to romp through the four-in-one playland where The Beatles live in *Help!* (1965)!

As Shel Silverstein observed, there is no Oz, but maybe the next-best thing is playing computer games like *Mech Warrior* or *Myst* or *Zork Inquisitor* that take you, like H. G. Wells's time traveler, into alien landscapes with strange problems to solve. Some of these games advance their stories with integrated movies. As you solve problems in *The Seventh Guest*, for instance, ghostly actors appear against computerized backgrounds to reveal more and more of the "back story." A similar situation occurs in the sequel, *The 11th Hour*, except that the movie clips are feature-film quality.

The closest I've come to date to "stepping into the film" is in a pair of horrific games called *Phantasmagoria*. The first game,



A different Sleepy Hollow is coming...

"Stage Fright," is about a young couple, Adrienne and Don, who move into an old house that once belonged to Carno, a stage illusionist who, in the late Nineteenth Century, married and presumably murdered five wives. Of course the house is haunted, of course Don is going to become possessed, and of course Adrienne is going to be in danger of repeating history. Through the course of the game (a generous seven CDs worth of story), you "become" Adrienne, making choices for her: where to go, what to look at, who to talk with. Every decision you make results in a film clip of varying length that takes Adrienne further along on her scary adventure. Thus the story is always in

"real time," unfolding little by little as you choose what to do.

The remarkable thing about "Stage Fright" is if I saw it in a movie theatre as a non-interactive feature film I'd be telling you to stay away from it. The story is nothing new, you've seen variations on it before and probably better acted (performances in "Stage Fright" range from excellent to awful), though the gruesome special effects are generally well done.

But at the game's climax, I made Adrienne walk through a sinister and heretofore-locked door and got her killed. If I'd seen her do the same thing in a movie, I would have wanted to yell, "Don't you know he's in there

waiting for you, DUMMY?!" In other words, I made the same stupid choice you always see the next victim make in slasher films. And that's what makes "Stage Fright" so compelling. Adrienne, who happily and necessarily turns in one of the decent acting jobs, is sympathetic and smarter than most horror film heroines; in other words, the game bonds the player to her intensely, and if you get her killed, it's your fault, and that makes all the difference.

Next time, I promise, I'll rescue you!

Aspectrum of remakes and sequels, some of them in the works, some merely rumored, runs the gamut from "Can't wait!" to "Why bother?" and includes *Alien 5*, *Back to the Future 4*, *Blade Runner 2*, *The Crow: Salvation*, *Jurassic Park 3*, *Mad Max 4*, *The Matrix 2*, *Predator 3*, *Starship Troopers 2*, *Terminator 3*, *Time Bandits 2*, *Total Recall 2*, *Tron 2*, and *The X-Files 2*.

One of the more promising remakes is *Sleepy Hollow*, starring Johnny Depp and Christina Ricci, to be released November 19th by Paramount Pictures. "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" is a fable from Washington Irving's *The Sketch Book* that Walt Disney did an excellent funny-scary version of in *The Adventures of Ichabod and Mr. Toad* (1949). Tim Burton, director of *Sleepy Hollow*, says, "I had known the story of the Headless Horseman mainly from the Disney cartoon. It's one of the few American horror stories. I don't know what the power is exactly, but there's a certain reason why people always remember the Headless Horseman. He's a great symbol."

Mr. Burton, director and producer of many excellent genre films (*Edward Scissorhands*, *Ed Wood*, *James and the Giant Peach*, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*), makes an understandable error here. America, of course, has many great horror sto-



Johnny Depp doesn't look sleepy

ries, but "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" is not one of them. If you know the Washington Irving original, then you know that the scare Ichabod Crane got on his midnight ride was a dirty trick pulled by his romantic rival, Brom Bones. But that's not promising cinematic material, and the likelier choice is to make the Headless Horseman truly terrifying.

The plot of *Sleepy Hollow* adds a detectival twist to the old story: instead of being a schoolmaster, as he is in the Irving original and the Disney version, Ichabod (Depp) is a constable investigating a series of murders supposedly committed by the Hessian phantom. (The filming, by the by, was in England, not upstate New York). Will the story be nonsupernatural, after all? Unlikely ... especially with a promised eerie forest and a "tree of the dead" that bridges this world and the next, and, as a special bonus, a guest cameo by Christopher Lee.

Another remake rumored for release this fall is *Night of the Living Dead: The 30th Anniversary Edition*. There has been a lot of speculation about the truth of this project, but it now appears reliable that George Romero's 1968 horror film will be rereleased with added scenes written and directed by John A. Russo, coauthor of the original film.

Buena Vista Films intends to release *Toy Story 2* on November 24th, with the "Who's Who" voices of Tom Hanks, Tim Allen, Don Rickles, Wallace Shawn, Jon Ratzenberger, Annie Potts, Kelsey Grammer, David Ogden Stiers, Joan Cusack, and Wayne Knight. The story of the computer-generated cartoon sequel involves the theft of Woody at summer camp, with the other toys committed to rescuing him.

MGM plans to rerelease *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), but though it was Stanley Kubrick's express wish that the seventeen minutes excised after initial screenings *not* be restored, with all respect for the late film genius, I hope the studio reconsiders. The excised portion, which I have only read about, presumably figures importantly in foreshadowing Hal's murderous trick, and according to one critic, never should have been taken out. Its return to the rerelease at this late date cannot alter the aesthetic impact it has made for three decades, but it will attract the attention — and dollars — of a host of film buffs.

No release date has been set yet for *Beowulf*, though the film has been completed. The epic Old English poem has been tampered



A Friendly Universal Soldier?

with and set in a "techno-feudal future" a millenium from now, though presumably the action will center on Beowulf's (Christopher Lam-bert) sequential battles with Grendel, Grendel's mother, and a dragon that, at least in the original, some believe was meant as a metaphor for old age. Possibly not in this version.

Muppet lovers (doesn't that include everybody?), rejoice! New from Jim Henson Pictures and Columbia: *Elmo in Grouchland*, in which Elmo loses his blanket and has to journey to Grouchland to retrieve it. In addition to Elmo, the cast features Bert and Ernie, Big Bird, and of course Oscar the Grouch, with live appearances by Mandy Patinkin and Vanessa L. Williams as the Queen of Grouchland.

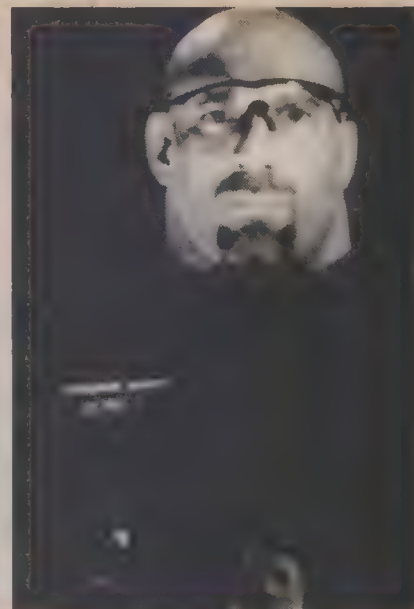
Arnold Schwarzenegger returns to fantasy films, not that he ever left them, in *End of Days*, to be released by Universal and Beacon Pictures on November 24th. In this one, big Arnie is an ex-cop turned security executive who squares off at the end of the millennium against Satan himself, who comes to New York to find a bride (didn't he learn a lesson in *Rosemary's Baby*? Whoops ... I mean the book, not the film). Another devil plot occurs in *Lost*

Souls, to be released by New Line Cinema/Castle Rock Entertainment/Prufrock Pictures/Avery Pix on or about October 8th. Starring Winona Ryder, it is the tale of a devout Christian who must somehow convince an atheistic journalist that Satan not only exists, but is up to no good (what else?).

K-Pax, another Universal Pictures release, stars Will Smith as Prot, a mental hospital patient who says he is a time/space traveler from the titular planet. Is he just a victim of multiple personality disorder, or will his wonderful psychic abilities change the lives of the inmates for the better? No-brainer, and old-timers might notice this plot bears a wee bit o' resemblance to the Clifton Webb comedy, *Mr. Bevedere Rings the Bell* (1951).

Hard-core SF is represented in *Supernova* and *Rendezvous with Rama*. The former, an MGM/UA production slated to open on October 8th, stars James Spader, Angela Bassett, Lou Diamond Phillips, and Robert Forster in a story about a hospital starship whose staff are endangered when they rescue the survivor of another spaceship. The latter, which Polygram and Propaganda Films / Revelations Entertainment plan to release on December 31st, is a cinematic adaptation by Andrew Kevin Walker of the well-known Arthur C. Clarke novel about a huge, mysterious spacecraft that enters the solar system to be investigated by an exploration team from Earth. The cast stars Morgan Freeman.

Robin Williams and Sam Neill star in the *Bicentennial Man* (based on a Hugo-winning story by Isaac Asimov), to be released soon by 1492 Productions and Walt Disney. In this one, Williams joins an exclusive club whose most illustrious members are Jack Haley and Brent Spiner ... Robin plays a robot who spends a couple of centuries trying to find out how to become human.



A not so Friendly Universal Soldier.

Speaking of, or rather, alluding to, *Star Trek*, word is that new *Trek* films are on temporary hold till the brouhaha dies down surrounding *The Phantom Menace*. Speaking of which ...

Star Wars Update: Well, everything I predicted in my column last issue came true. I saw *The Phantom Menace* and plan to see it again on an even wider screen. It was even better than I'd hoped, not perfect, but extremely satisfying. Only ...

They're right, Jar Jar is annoying. It's hard to catch a lot of his (her? its?) dialogue, the slapstick is heavy-handed ditto-footed and wears thin quickly; he (she? it?) just ain't funny, George. I'd read the advance grumbles that claimed Jar Jar was a disguised racial stereotype, and thought the critics were really stretching credibility, but in fact Jar Jar did remind me uncomfortably of Stepin Fetchit; half-expected him to say, "Feets, get moving." Maybe I wouldn't have felt that if I hadn't read the *New York Times* diatribe, but I suspect I would have, anyway. Hopefully, there will be no more of Jar Jar in Episode 2.

And there's the problem I had with *The Phantom Menace*. Two

more episodes to come, yet this one set up the story to come so well, the next parts are not all that necessary. Well, maybe one more ... Anakin has to go back, doesn't he, and try to rescue his mother? But won't that just put him in the Emperor-to-be's power, don't we KNOW that's what's going to happen?

Though I hope to be in line to see Episodes 2 and 3, I do believe George Lucas is fighting an uphill battle. I also think he will probably win, but will it be a total victory?

It's not too late to renumber the series and go on to what happens after *The Return of the Jedi* ...

Meanwhile, there's talk of yet another reissued special edition of the original *Star Wars* (*Episode 4: A New Hope*) with new special effects that will improve upon the already improved-upon special effects in the current special edition.

Department of TV Shows That May Have Escaped Your Notice

It's always a treat to roam the dealers' rooms at science-fiction conventions and uncover oddball films and old TV shows on videotape. I'm not talking about "mainstream" oldies like *Star Trek* or *The Twilight Zone* or *The Prisoner*. I mean hard to find Golden Oldies (some of them Golden Turkeys; retrospection is sometimes a rude awakening) such as *The Outer Limits* or *Lights Out*. I don't know if there are still copies out there somewhere of some of my fondest TV viewing memories below ... if there are, do send word!

Suspense — the episode I can't forget was an adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" starring Bela Lugosi as the victim. I don't remember when it aired, probably in the early 1950s, but I do remember that Lugosi was a loathsome Nazi who, unlike the hapless Fortunato in the original, deserved his



Elmo visits a not so grouchy Vanessa Williams

dreadful fate. I've been told by one collector that this looks cheesy by modern standards, and I don't doubt it, but Lugosi was my favorite antihero, and I'd still love to find a print of this on tape.

Tales of Tomorrow was a science-fiction anthology show that got off to a great start with a dramatization starring Lon McAllister of Theodore Sturgeon's short story, "The Sky Was Full of Ships." The series, which ran from 1951 through 1953, featured Hollywood and Broadway stars including Lee J. Cobb, Eva Gabor, Veronica Lake, Leslie Nielsen, Franchot Tone, and those horror film greats Lon Chaney, Jr., and Boris Karloff. Probably the episode most aficionados recall is "The Cocoon" and its sequel, "The Fury of the Cocoon," about a horrible invisible creature found in the jungle, but they also did ambitious adaptations of *Frankenstein* and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*.

And lastly, here is the TV show that I remember fondly, but that nobody I've ever met seems to remember — *Stage 13*. CBS broadcast this live half-hour

anthology series of mystery, suspense and horror on Wednesday, April 19, 1950, at 9:30 p.m. It ran till June 28th of the same year, not even thirteen unlucky weeks. I watched it eagerly every week, but the only episode that I remember was the very first one: the story of a soldier and his lady friend who visit a Druidic circle of stones, it may have been Stonehenge, I don't recall. While there, they experience a horrifying psychic vision of a Druid priest with knife upraised to slaughter her. (I seem to recall this was an early use of subliminal imagery, but I suspect my memory is distorting it.) The story ended with the foreshadowed event taking place, and in 1950 an unhappy ending was unusual for prime-time TV. One of the versions of W. W. Jacobs's "The Monkey's Paw," for instance, ended with it all being a dream. The atrocity packed a colossal shock in those days; it wouldn't nowadays, but still, *Stage 13* looms large in my memory: it certainly contributed to my training as a horror writer. □

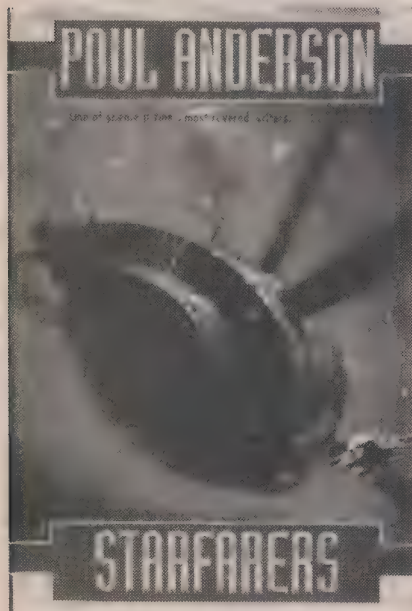
Poul Anderson returns

Starfarers

By Poul Anderson
Tor, 1998
383 pp., \$25.95

Some of Poul Anderson's recent books have tended to be preachy; happily, *Starfarers* isn't.

Anderson imagines the ultimate Slower Than Light (STL) drive: it's little short of magical, but this isn't an engineering text. With the drive, an average velocity of 99.99% of C can be obtained, so time dilation makes trips to the nearby stars quite practical. A trip to a star forty



light years off takes eight weeks ship time but forty years back on earth. The travelers arrive back on Earth eighty years after they departed; their contemporaries are dead and gone and society has

changed significantly.

Anderson has the crews of the interstellar ships band together for their own sanity, effectively forming a new, small nation which is centered on Earth, but which is evolving 20 or 30 times slower than Earth-bound nations. Naturally, only a tiny fraction of the starfarers are on Earth at any time, and few stay for long.

Ships propelled by the drive can be detected at great distances. Astronomers discover a cluster of spaceship tracks about 5,000 light years off — spacefaring aliens! An expedition is readied, and the bulk of the story tells of that expedition. Though the story of the expedition was well done, I found the sense of what was happening on Earth during the ten thousand years they were gone to be even more interesting.

Nearly alone among SF authors, Poul Anderson has a gut-level sense of what time can do. He shows Western civilization evolving into alien ways and eventually disappearing; new peoples conquering and settling North America; new religions replacing old and new languages evolving. By the time the expedition returns, Earth has become completely alien.

Recommended.

Rating: ☆☆☆ 1/2

Jingo

By Terry Pratchett
HarperPrism, 1997
437 pp., \$6.50

Jingo's another good Discworld book. The main characters are Samuel Vimes, the Police Chief of Ankh-Morpork, Captain Carrot, and the Patrician. The event is the rising of an island in the straits between Ankh-Morpork and the Empire of Klatch — the island rises every few hundred years. The island precipitates a war between



the two nations, the rise of xenophobic tensions in Ankh-Morpork, and an aristocratic putsch against the Patrician.

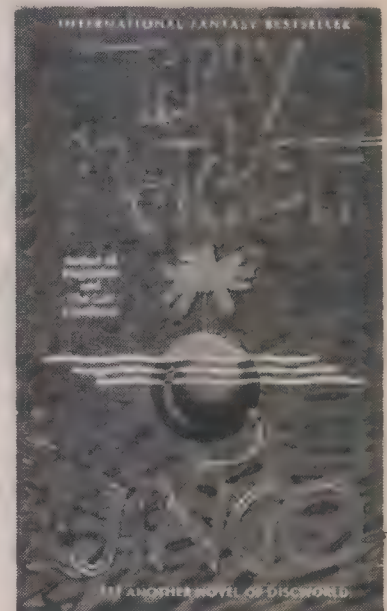
It's amazing how Pratchett has evolved a deft enough comedic style to talk about something like race relations and militarism without ceasing to be funny and without overtly preaching.

More good reading!

Rating: ☆☆☆

Finity

By John Barnes
Tor, 1999



303 pp., \$22.95

Barnes has to be one of the top half-dozen SF authors writing today, and *Finity* is another fine piece of work. The story starts in the Free State of Enzee — New Zealand — a hundred years after Hitler won WW II. The world is divided up into the Eleven Reichs, the Japanese Empire, and an assortment of minor Free States filled with expatriate Americans.

Rating System

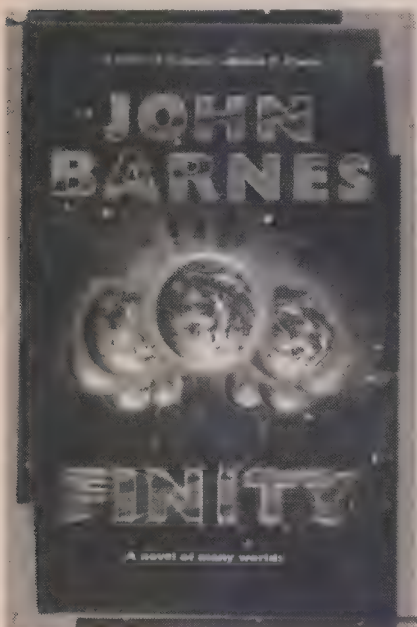
☆☆☆☆☆	Outstanding
☆☆☆☆	Very Good
☆☆☆	Good
☆☆	Fair
☆	Poor

(Incidentally, Barnes has the historical sophistication to realize that even a world where Hitler won would eventually cease to be a living horror. A hundred years after the Nazi victory, most people live decent lives and society seems to be relaxing back to something we'd recognize as normal. And then he zings us when the main character is surprised at seeing a black American — he'd thought they'd all been killed during the Conquest. Chilling and very well thought out.)

This bizarre world is advanced perhaps twenty years beyond our current level, with AIs running cars and the like. The main character is an astronomer who is hired by the largest multi-national in the world to pursue a research technique aimed at developing effective strategies for problem-solving.

And then things start to get very strange.

I won't detail the rest of the plot



because it's interesting enough to be worth reading on its own. I don't mind giving spoilers, particularly, but this book has a good enough puzzle to be worth keeping spoilers to a minimum. Suffice it to say that it gets very complicated, though, ultimately, I found the explanation for all the strangeness to be a bit on the weak side.

Still, it's a good piece of work.

Rating: ☆☆☆ 1/2

Starlight 2

Edited by Patrick Nielsen Hayden
Tor, 1998

319 pp., \$24.95

Patrick Nielsen Hayden has created a series of superb original SF — it's just a pity that it's two or more years between volumes. Volume Two is every bit as good as Volume One was.

My favorite story was Ted Chiang's "Story of Your Life," which explores the idea that really understanding a truly alien way of thinking might let a human see things we simply can't better than it's ever been done. (Chiang is a marvel: I think this is only his fourth or fifth story and he's won a Hugo and a Campbell.)

Robert Charles Wilson's "Divided by Infinity" has an interesting gimmick and some neat fannish references, while Dave Langford's "A Game of Consequences" plays one of his favorite themes again, better than ever. (Those three were on my Hugo nominations ballot.)

A couple of other stories, such as Raphael Carter's, were interesting, but several others, while well-written, weren't SF at all as far as I can tell.

For example, "Mrs. Mabb" by Susanna Clarke was a story about hallucinations where for no apparent reason (except, perhaps to get it into *Starlight 2*) the author writes, in effect, "and they were all real." (Sort of the opposite of "and he woke up and it was all a dream.") Not a bad story, you understand — none of them are bad stories — but not SF.

"Snow," by Geoffrey A. Landis, is another oddity that just squeaks in as SF by the last 12 lines. Somehow, what he did made the story SF for me while Clarke's twist seemed a cheat. I can't say why, precisely.

Still, *Starlight 2* is a superb book filled with good reading and several pieces of very good SF.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

A Deepness in the Sky

By Vernor Vinge
Tor, 1999

606 pp., \$27.95

Wow!

I've waited five or so years for a new book from Vinge, and it's been worth the wait. *A Deepness in the Sky* is his best book yet and is a damn good example of what first-rate SF can be.

Deepness doesn't really connect to any previous story or novel, though one character from *Deepness*, Pham, is evidently the Pham who appears in *A Fire Upon the Deep*. No matter, *A Deepness in the Sky* stands very well indeed on its own.

Deepness takes place entirely in the Slow Zone where AI and FTL travel and FTL communications are impossible. The time is about 8000 years from now, and Mankind is spread over a rough sphere of stars many hundreds of light years in diameter. Communication is by laser and by STL interstellar ships with nearly all of the crew in cold sleep.

In the end of Human space in



which the story is set, the Qeng Ho is a loosely organized society of traders who live mostly on their ships and carry goods and technology between the stars. There is no interstellar government, and while star travel is robust, it isn't frequent. A backwater planet might see a starship every century or so, while the greatest civilized centers may have several in dock at a time.

As hinted in *A Fire Upon the Deep*, one of the limitations of the Slow Zone is that AI is impossible. As a consequence, no civilization in

all of Human space has undergone a Vingean Singularity. The highest of high technologies, while well beyond what we can do ourselves today, is not beyond what we can understand, and in fact not beyond what we can expect to have achieved by 2050 or so.

Captain Sam Park has brought a large Qeng Ho fleet to an out-of-the-way world near the edge of Human space. His official motive is to launch an expedition to the On-Off star, an amazing astrophysical freak 50 light years beyond the edge of human settlement.

The latest news is that in the star's previous two light cycles, primitive radio has been heard



from its vicinity — alien radio. Although very distant alien sources are known to exist, never before has there been a contemporaneous alien civilization within reach of Human ships. Capt. Park launches for the On-Off star as does an expedition from the Emergents, a nasty totalitarian civilization also located on the edge of Human space. They arrive simultaneously, and then the fun begins.

The Emergents are among the nastier villains I've seen, with a plausible and very, very effective slavery — Vinge has dreamt up a totalitarianism which just might be stable and effective even against free opponents.

How Pham defeats the Emergents is a large, complex, plausible, tautly-told story.

Vinge develops two stories in parallel: the conflicts between the

two human groups, and the conflicts that the aliens — the Spiders — are having amongst themselves.

On the Spider planet, a civilization is building itself again — the Spiders are adapted to their planet and hibernate during the long dark periods. The story is told from the point of view of two of the leading Spiders, a genius polymath and his wife, who is the command general of her country's Intelligence branch, and their children.

Vinge makes all his characters, human and Spider, good guy and villain, real.

Besides a good story with good characters, Vinge has enough throwaway ideas in the background for any three books.

Probably the main fault of the book is that it's not as fast-paced as *A Fire Upon the Deep*. But it's better!

Rating: ★★★★★

The Cassini Division

By Ken MacLeod

Tor, 1999

240 pp., \$22.95

The Cassini Division (pun intended) is the elite military force of the Solar Union which guards the Union against the post-Humans who put an interstellar wormhole into orbit around Jupiter, but retreated to its surface when their merely human slaves escaped through the wormhole. The post-Humans have since been flooding the Solar System with computer viruses, but otherwise haven't ventured off the planet. So far this sounds like old-fashioned space opera.

But the Solar Union is a communist utopia where nanotechnology has guaranteed effectively unlimited material wealth for everyone, yielding a non-money economy, and which is loosely governed — including the Cassini Division itself — by open, elected committees.

The story is cleverly designed to provide a tour of the Solar Union, beginning on Earth as the main character — a very influential ship captain in the Division — searches for a physicist who may be able to understand the wormhole and who disappeared years previously into an enclave of non-cooperators (peo-

ple who deliberately turn their backs on the communistic Solar Union and retain a primitive money-based economy in their enclaves around London).

The adventure next carries them to Cassini Division HQ on Callisto, then through the wormhole to New Mars, a capitalist society built by the escaped slaves, where they confront the post-Humans.

Many SF novels get their kick from speculative science. *The Cassini Division* indulges in speculative social organization. The utopian Solar Union is plausible enough in many respects — it's hard to see how a money-based economy could survive in the face of cornucopian nanotechnology, and

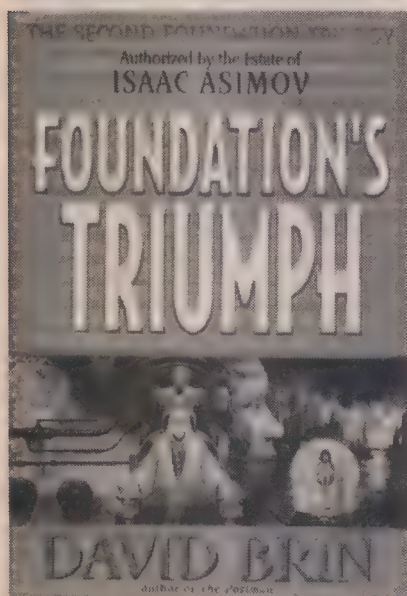


it's easy to imagine local society looking a lot like the Solar Union's. But MacLeod's nano is capable of being easily turned to destruction — the gray goo problem — and I doubt that any society could survive without much more defense against that than the Solar Union's. (The main character mutters about orbital zaps being used to deal with outbreaks. Nonsense! No one would be willing to allow whole cities to be obliterated to deal with nano outbreaks which could be handled less spectacularly by a police force. The first time a city is wiped out, people everywhere would demand policing of nano and a pervasive governmental presence would be inevitable.)

Ignoring that, the other big oddity is the very peculiar theoretical underpinnings of the Solar Union's economic and political philosophy.

Instead of being based on universal altruistic cooperation — the New Communist Man idea — it seems to be based on a Randian notion of selfishness as the only virtue. Evidently enlightened self-interest yields a communist utopia.

It's implausible when the libertarians preach it, and I don't believe it here, either. I'm afraid that this is the political equivalent of the long, gobbledegook science explanation so beloved of the super-science stories where three pages of physics fast-talk ends with a combination FTL drive and super-zapper. It *was* entertaining to see someone ringing the changes like that, though.



(I wish I knew more about Trotskyite beliefs. I have the sense that MacLeod may be making some amusing Trotskyite jokes.)

The Cassini Division is an excellent piece of SF, treating us to good adventure, an interesting future and some neat social and political variations.

Rating: ★★★★★

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone
By J. K. Rowling
Scholastic Press, 1998
(1997 in the UK)
309 pp., \$16.95

Harry Potter is a delightful YA (Young Adult) book which — like any good YA book — can be thoroughly enjoyed by adults, also.

Harry Potter is an orphan raised by an unloving and extremely mundane Aunt and Uncle along with a remarkably swinish cousin. We know that there's something special about him, and he dimly guesses that there may be also, but mostly he just endures an awful childhood. Until at age eleven he receives an invitation to attend Hogwarts, the greatest school in England for teaching witchcraft and wizardry.

Like everyone else, he's unaware that there is a whole world of witches and wizards which exists in and alongside our own, carefully keeping to themselves. But into that world he is thrust — and not at all unwillingly. The magical world is a lot of fun — in the traditional ritual of outfitting for school, Harry is taken by a sort-of giant to a hidden section of London where the magical shops are to be found to buy his clothes and supplies for his new school — and Hogwarts' itself is marvelous.

It looks like the plot is fairly standard for YA: the ugly duckling goes through all the usual school problems: bullies, unfair teachers, etc, and makes friends. And then the fantasy element takes over and he and his friends are thrust into resolving the Mysterious Events that are happening around them. It's great fun.

Rating: ★★★★★

Foundation's Triumph
By David Brin
HarperPrism, 1999
328 pp., \$25.00

I've read all of the extended *Foundation* books. First Asimov Himself welded the Robot books onto the *Foundation* universe, revealing R. Daneel Olivaw as the secret Master of the Galaxy, an immortal robot who has spent the last twenty thousand years trying to carry out the Three Laws on a galactic scale.

In the original *Foundation* books, Asimov wrote himself into a corner with the Second *Foundation*, finding no better solution for Humanity than a secret benevolent dictatorship of the mental elite — Plato's philosopher-kings. In the later books, he recognized the evil

in that and invented Gaia — a mass-mind of enlightened Humanity — as superior to the Second *Foundation*.

Gregory Benford, Greg Bear, and David Brin were commissioned to write a trilogy of *Foundation* novels to extend Asimov's work. *Foundation's Triumph* is the final book of the three and manages — just barely — to pull a consistent and satisfying ending out of an incredibly convoluted mess.

Brin's book, the final book of this new trilogy, manages to satisfactorily tie up the loose ends not just in these last three but in Asimov's late *Foundation* work, also. It's eas-



ily the best of the three and, frankly, better than Asimov's later *Foundation* books.

The main character in *Foundation's Triumph* is again Hari Seldon, and the entire book takes place after Seldon finishes recording his Time Vault messages. Old and sick, he can't resist one last attempt to discover what's *really* going on in the Galaxy. And find out he does. By the time the book is done he's gotten a good look at just about every secret conspiracy of men and robots the Galaxy can offer.

Probably the weakest link in the book — in this whole trilogy — is the labored explanation of why there has been no Vingean Singularity. Naively, one would have expected a singularity not long after the positronic robot was

put into large-scale use, especially combined with the near-simultaneous discovery of interstellar travel. But nothing happened and, in fact, the Galactic Empire seems almost backward compared with the Spacers' Aurora or Susan Calvin's Earth. Why?

Unfortunately, Benford, Bear, and Brin tried to answer that by postulating one or more diseases which — somehow, I couldn't quite make out how — had the effect of making high technology societies unstable. I think it would have been considerably wiser to have just ignored the whole issue.

On the other hand, the details of the many and varied schisms among the robots is brilliant. It would have happened just like that. Besides the Zeroth Law robots led by Daneel, there are Calvinian robots who reject the Zeroth. And both groups are themselves splintered many ways, with R. Daneel's group being the largest and best-organized.

Brin mentions in passing secret robot wars where one group of robots fought another group — robots have absolutely no compunctions about destroying other robots — though these wars were necessarily secret since all the robots agreed that it would be harmful to people if they became aware of the robots in their midst!

Brin does a fine job of pulling together an over-complicated situation and resolving it satisfactorily. He even manages to hint at a way out of Asimov's basic dilemma of which Master Humanity must accept for its own good — at the end, Hari Seldon, the real hero of all the Foundation novels, has the last word.

You do need to read the first two books of this latest Foundation trilogy to appreciate Brin's book.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

Deep Time

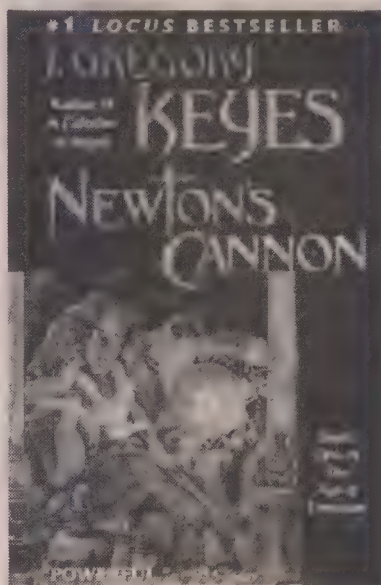
By Gregory Benford
Avon, 1999
225 pp., \$20.00

This isn't SF — or perhaps it could be called Applied SF.

A few years ago, Benford was recruited to be part of a Federal Department of Energy committee

to devise really long-term strategy for marking radioactive waste storage sites. The first third of the book records their plans for marking storage sites, while later chunks of the book include a failed attempt to send a complex message to Titan aboard Cassini, and about a Library of Life, a plan to save comprehensive libraries of DNA.

The work on radioactive burial marking was most interesting. Benford's committee considered how to mark things to last 100,000 years, and how messages which might be misinterpreted (it wouldn't do for the message to attract some later civilization to dig just where we wanted them to avoid!)



They even considered non-physical messages like myths.

I found the Titan message to be much less well thought out, particularly the black and white photo which was — somehow — supposed to be a better depiction of humanity than the famous outline drawing of a nude man and woman aboard Voyager. Because blockheads objected to nearly every aspect of the Voyager image — even that the woman was shorter than the man — the Titan disk attempted to defuse in advance every possible objection — people were seated, it included every race, a woman was the central figure, etc., etc. Every fool's hot button was carefully attended to. And of course the resulting picture was

so complex as to be uninterpretable without context. The rest of the message was a good attempt to send a message to another culture with which there is no continuity at all other than technology.

Rating: ☆☆☆ 1/2

Newton's Cannon

By J. Gregory Keyes
Del Rey, 1998
368 pp., \$6.99

Isaac Newton — probably the greatest physicist ever — was also passionately interested in alchemy and spent a considerable amount of time on it. (This is often portrayed as Newton in his dotage, but when he lived a reasonable man could still believe that alchemy might yet be understood and reduced to a rational set of principles.)

What if Newton had succeeded?

In *Newton's Cannon*, he discovers the critical laws of alchemy in his middle age, and by the time he is an old man in the early 1700s, an alchemical revolution has swept across Europe. But this is a Europe where the old wars are still going on — Louis XIV still hopes to conquer all of Europe, and Britain still opposes him.

In this book (the first of three or more) we follow the very young Ben Franklin experimenting with alchemy in Boston and several French researchers trying to build a weapon with which France can destroy Britain.

At the same time, there appears to be meddling going on by beings who in some fashion dwell in an alchemical realm — or, at any rate, can only interact with us through indirect effects based on alchemy.

Newton's Cannon is very well done. It appears that Keyes understands the history of the period, so people's and nation's motivations are reasonable and the general setting is top notch.

It's a good story which is just begun here.

Rating: ☆☆☆ 1/2





The Idea of Empire

There's a small miracle in the May 17th, 1999 issue of *The New Yorker*, in the form of an article by Oliver Morton, "In Pursuit of Infinity." It's about galactic empires. "So what?" you may reasonably ask. "What's so miraculous about that? Another mainstream puff-piece — or sneer-piece — about SF, mostly about George Lucas ..."

No, no, I hastily reply. We have come to expect that articles about SF in the mainstream press shall be abysmally ignorant. In fact, as a tirade in *The Spectator* about a year ago seemed to remind us, total ignorance of the subject matter is the chief qualification for writing such an article.

But times are changing. *The New Yorker* publishes Stephen King fiction. Morton actually knows what he's talking about. This article, blurbled "The greatest space-empire was born long, long ago in Brooklyn," is about Isaac Asimov, *The Foundation Trilogy*, van Vogt, John W. Campbell. The only thing I can object to is the still unproven claim that Charles Manson's "family" took *Stranger in a Strange Land* to heart.

(A tangential reference to the main subject anyway. Tangentially, the facts are these: Heinlein hired a lawyer to interview Manson, who turned out to be virtually illiterate and had read almost nothing. One of Manson's women wrote Heinlein a fan letter, to which Heinlein politely replied before discovering who she was, after which he reacted as if

he'd found a rattlesnake in his bed. See *Grumbles from the Grave* on this. If Manson heard of Heinlein's ideas, it must have been second-hand, from his followers. I go on tangentially at this length because it is relevant to discuss the impact of science fiction ideas and images on the larger culture, for better or worse. That's what the *New Yorker* article is about.)

Morton comes up with a real insight, which I will pass on to you. He is quoting a French writer, Gaston Bachelard, who wrote in *The Poetics of Space*:

Immensity is a philosophical category of daydream. Daydream undoubtedly feeds on all kinds of sights, but through a sort of natural inclination, it contemplates grandeur. And this contemplation produces an attitude that is so special, an inner state that is so unlike any other, that the daydream transports the dreamer outside the immediate world to a world that bears the mark of infinity.

(p. 87)

The other neat bit is his analysis of the difference between *The Foundation Trilogy* and *Star Wars*:

Lucas did not want to stretch the audience's perceptions to include all of humanity. He wanted to narrow things down to a handful of people amid the superbly orchestrated hurly-burly. The destruction of the Empire in Star Wars turns not on vast historical forces but on family relationships and a young man's growing up.

(p. 87)

Which is why *The Foundation Trilogy* has a much greater sense of grandeur, and would be harder to film. Sure, you can see Lucas's vision of Trantor in *The Phantom*

Menace (and Asimov has become pervasive enough that you can overhear common folk, not SF fans, remarking on the similarity), but historical forces don't make good box office. The daydream of *Star Wars* and most cinematic epics is that individuals matter in a big way. If Luke can just use the force and get that lucky shot down the Death Star's exhaust pipe the fate of the whole galaxy will be different.

Certainly print SF has this daydream aspect too. A.E. van Vogt, another great exponent of imperial futures, hurled hugeness around with all the abandon of a child playing with toy soldiers in a sandbox. Here's a characteristic quote I found in "The Mixed Men" (the original *Astounding* novelette), which pretty much sums it up:

... the Mixed Men also had an Earth battleship, and a marvelously new model at that, a ship whose type had been in the design stage for 800 years.

... its nine hundred billion separate parts had gone into mass production seventy-five years before, with the expectation that the first ship would be completed at the end of seventy years, and additional ones every minute thereafter for five years.

... What were Hunston's intentions? How did he intend to get around the fact that Imperial Earth had more warships than there were men, women, and children in the Fifty Suns?

— ASF Jan 1945, p. 23

Now let me get this straight: Charlemagne commissions a new kind of longship to fight the Vikings. The design work went on so long that they didn't have a prototype until the reign of Kaiser Wilhelm II, although he couldn't

Rating System

★★★★★	Outstanding
★★★★	Very Good
★★★	Good
★★	Fair
★	Poor

use the things in World War I because it took another seventy-five years to go into production, but sometime in the 1990s enough longships are produced to bury the entire surface of the Earth to a depth of several miles ... I wonder where they got all the wood.

One may subversively ask: does Asimov's empire of 25 million human-inhabited worlds ruled by a central government, and a monarchy at that, make any more sense?

Well, maybe, but I think the main difference is that the *Foundation* series with all its professorial gloss and talk of vaguely Spenglerian or even Marxist scientific-historical determinism just *sounds* more respectable.

At least Asimov was writing about the value of knowledge, rather than the need to switch off your brain and trust your feelings to guide your lightsaber.

We cannot deny that the Western mind has been haunted by the idea of Empire, particularly the most successful of all, the Roman Empire, whose protracted collapse provided the model for Asimov, not to mention for the political agendas of everybody from Charlemagne to Mussolini.

There was a time, no doubt, when empires were a good thing, when their chief function was keeping the barbarians from the gates. All that classical Greek and Latin literature wouldn't have amounted to more than a pile of ashes if illiterate tribesmen had come trampling over everything and burned all the books. And when they *did* come trampling, we called the result the Dark Ages.

There is something immensely moving and tragic about the spectacle of a man of letters like Cassiodorus (6th century), who had been a senator of Rome but lived to see the Senate dissolved, the promising Ostrogothic state of Italy destroyed by a blundering imperial reconquest, and then saw *that* collapse under the feet of illiterate, book-trampling Lombards.

Cassiodorus lived at the very cusp of the Dark Ages and knew it. Rome was a depopulated ruin. Its great Palatine library was

gone, burned by the Pope. The classical age was *over*, and so Cassiodorus and a few followers retired to a mountaintop, built Monte Cassino abbey, and devoted their lives to recopying and preserving what few ancient books they had managed to save from the awful wreck. Such a figure is the inspiration for Walter Miller's Leibowitzian monks, and also, I suspect, for Asimov's Hari Seldon. But the bold, science-fictional leap Asimov made was to imagine what it would have been like for a Cassiodorus figure to have lived, not in 600 A.D., but more like 200 A.D., when imperial decline was only visible to the sharpest eye. What if he could begin his work of preservation and renewal early? What then, too, if, centuries along the path set by the Seldon Plan, some people are able to see that what is needed is not another military empire based on force and autocracy (and inevitably to decay again), but something wholly new?

But it's the romance and the grandeur of Empire that appeal to our daydreams. We dream of Rome with its brilliant spectacles and marble palaces, the *Pax Romana* under which art and commerce flourished as they never had before. Which is of course a simplification. We know perfectly well that to actually live in Rome in Trajan's time would be rather like living in a mix of barnyard, sewer, and slaughterhouse. And it's noisy, crowded, and really bad news if you happen to be Jewish, a slave, or fodder for the Arena. We also acknowledge that in our own time imperialism is not necessarily a good thing, what with the history of colonialism, the two world wars, the Soviet Union, and the dangerous seduction of the United States into a quasi-imperialist role.

Still we dream of the Emperor on his throne, grander than any king. For all we know such people seldom lived happy or fulfilled lives. The best, like Marcus Aurelius, were slaves to duty, swept along by the tide of events with little personal time for happiness, beauty, or even a good

night's sleep. Most emperors in most empires throughout history have lived in fear and died violently. Good men rising to the throne at the tail end of the imperial process face catastrophes no virtue can prevail against. At best, like Manuel II Paleologus, they desperately manage to hang on, praying to God that they won't have to be the *last*. And the last, Constantine XI, must put on his sword and armor and go to face death bravely, because it wouldn't have affected the outcome one bit if he'd snivelled and run away, but the role and office of emperor make certain demands, which must be met.

Such things are probably best left in dreams, but they're not going away any time soon. Our science fiction and fantasy continue to be filled with the huge, the sweeping, the grand.

Justinian

By H.N. Turtletaub

Forge, 1998

511 pp., \$26.95

Out front I'll admit this one isn't science fiction. It's a historical novel, about a headstrong brat who grew up to be one of the worst emperors of Byzantium. But it's of interest to science fiction readers, first because it's really by Harry Turtledove, noted alternate-history writer, and SF author, and second because, far more convincingly than most SF or fantasy novels I've seen of late, it gives a very real sense of what it would be like to *be* an emperor, how that unique perspective warps the soul of the person who inherits it.

Why the pseudonym? Because most of the general public knows the word "Byzantine" only as an odd pejorative — and this book isn't even about the "famous" Justinian, but someone else, who reigned 150-some years later — this book is going to sell far fewer copies than one of Harry's alternate Civil War novels. Suppose the average Turtledove book sells 20,000 in hardcover. Suppose this one sells 5,000. The bean-counters at the big bookstore chains will say, "Look, the last Turtledove

book sold only 5,000 copies, so we will only order 5,000 copies of *Guns of the South, Part IV*," and Harry's career would suddenly take a nose dive. So the pseudonym is a necessity.

I'm sure it wasn't intended to fool anybody, except the bean-counters. This is actually my favorite Harry Turtledove book and it may become yours. It's a labor of love, something Harry has wanted to write for decades, ever since he first translated from the Greek the chronicle which tells how Justinian II, coming back from exile as no deposed emperor ever had, was caught in a storm on the Black Sea. One of his followers, Myakes, begged him to pray to God, forgive all his enemies, etc. so that those in the boat might be spared. "No!" cried Justinian. "If I have mercy on even one of them, may God drown me now!" And the storm stopped. Justinian returned to Constantinople, crawled in through an aqueduct, and retook the throne. As if his first reign (685-695) wasn't bad enough, his second (705-711) was a absolute reign of terror as Justinian, drunk on revenge, became genuinely crazed, ordering the massacres of whole populations, until he went Macbeth-like to his inevitable doom.

It's a great and terrible story. Turtledove has modelled his book on Gore Vidal's *Julian*, using the same device of having a close companion to the title character (in this case, the above-mentioned Myakes) act like a chorus while the emperor himself tells most of the story in his own words. We see the emperor from the outside and from the inside, as the not-yet-evil but headstrong adolescent Justinian manages to piss away four generations of goodwill (of his heroic ancestors) in just ten years. Then his nose is chopped off, and he is sent into exile, Myakes at his side. The amazing part is that he comes back, as if from the dead, so determined that he is even able to sit through medieval plastic surgery without flinching. This indeed was an extraordinary man, the sort who, as emperor, could turn history one way or the other.

Somewhere he crosses a line and becomes evil, a prototype for Ivan the Terrible. But Myakes, who has been with Justinian since boyhood, can't imagine deserting him even then.

Turtledove tells the *story* splendidly. The book is not one you will easily put down. What I think SF and fantasy writers should study is Turtledove's depiction of how an empire actually works, the emperor's day-to-day experience. What left me a little dissatisfied, though, is the feeling that even after all this I don't really understand Justinian, that even in his own narrative he hasn't revealed his mind (for all he's told us about his sex life in the kind of detail only a late 20th-century novelist would, and once anachronistically quoted General Sherman), and the ever-loyal Myakes hasn't revealed much of anything save that only a fellow monster or a dullard could have survived at Justinian's side for so long, and he's not a monster. Vidal, writing *Julian*, was able to make his commentators be shrewd intellectuals. Turtledove, logically, cannot. There's no way out, but it does seem to diminish the book.

Rating: ★★★★★

Now let's look at some more fantastic empires:

Sailing to Sarantium

By Guy Gavriel Kay
HarperPrism, 1998
437 pp., \$24.00

This one's a fantasy, by a highly respected fantasy author, and I have to confess I found it a real slog. If nothing else, it seems proof that economic factors have made virtually all the books in our field twice as long as they should be. And this is only Book One of the Sarantine Mosaic.

If only Kay had managed to condense it all into one book. If only writers today would study Alfred Bester or early Heinlein or Charles Harness or even van Vogt and learn what pacing is ... I think I would yawn a lot less.

The setting is Byzantium with the names changed. In the pro-

logue, vultures gather as old emperor Apius (Anastasius I) breathes his last. Gruff, straightforward Count Valerius (Justin I) outwits the slimy courtiers and becomes emperor, probably with the connivance of his more sophisticated nephew Petrus (Justinian I, whose pre-imperial name was Petrus) ... meanwhile the empire is threatened by the Bassanids (Sassanid Persians). Petrus marries the dancer Aliana (Theodora). Somebody is murdered with a dose of Sarantine fire (Byzantine or Greek fire, which would be an anachronism in A.D. 511 — but wait, this is a fantasy, see ...) The Blue and Green circus factions get out of hand. (Blues and Greens.) The Nika riots happen. (Nika riots.) Everybody argues about religion a lot, for all they swear by "Holy Jad" (Christ) and the heretics are not quite Arians. Meanwhile, the story actually starts fifty pages later when Crispin, a mosaic-artist from Rhodias (Rome, now occupied by the Antae — Goths) is summoned to the holy city of Sarantium (Byzantium) to work on the new Hagia Sophia (Justinian's famous church) ...

This historical substitution game is getting pretty dull by the time an actual fantastic element seems to intrude. Before setting out, Crispin meets a wizard, who gives him a mechanical critter as a companion, as cute as the mechanical owl in *Clash of the Titans*, though with an allusion to the famous mechanical birds of Byzantium Yeats wrote about (9th century, reign of Theophilus, another anachronism if this weren't a fantasy).

It all moves like molasses in January. I think inside this 1000-pound monster of a book there is a potentially good, slender volume screaming to get out. It would be perfectly fine to construct a fantasy out of the images of Byzantium, and never mind the specific history. There is an emotional resonance in the theme of a young man summoned to the Big City, the only place where his artistic dreams may be fulfilled, but he must face dangers, get involved in

intrigues, etc. It could be great stuff. But for all Kay writes immaculately, he can't bring it to life. I think the fake-Byzantium is a mistake. It should be the real thing. We are too continually reminded that this is something the author made up.

But mostly the problem is pacing, pacing, pacing.

Rating: ☆

Foundation and Chaos

By Greg Bear

HarperPrism, 1999

401 pp., \$6.99

I am normally hostile to this sort of sharecrop writing — I'd rather see original works from writers capable of creating them — but I actually found myself enjoying this second volume of the "New Foundation Trilogy." It is an extremely able pastiche. Of course here we have a modern SF writer trying to imitate the *later* Foundation books, the ones in which Asimov himself only halfway succeeded in grafting the Robot series into the Foundation, and was himself pastiching what he had written 40 years earlier. It is a rich background, and Asimovian robots always had a certain mythic grandeur to them, as the secret protectors of mankind, by Hari Seldon's own time reduced to myth and known as the "eternals." But one of these eternals is damaged in a supernova explosion and may be rogue. Meanwhile, a corrupt galactic minister is trying to prove that robots exist, hunting down and killing psychics of the sort who will later become the Second Foundation, hoping to blow one of these exceptional people's heads off and find wiring inside. The ideas are of course Isaac's. Bear juggles them well. The result is halfway between real science fiction, which challenges, and prose-television, which comforts by offering sameness. If Asimov's universe is to be turned into a franchise, I suppose Bear has written a new episode about as well as anyone can.

Rating: ☆☆☆

Noted

Neverwhere

By Neil Gaiman

Avon Books, 1997

\$24.00

This has just been re-issued in paperback with a big push, to tie in with an import of the BBC TV series on which it is based. Gaiman is novelizing his own script, which raises the book well above the level of hackwork. This isn't really Magic Empire fiction but Magic Realm fiction. There is a whole, chaotic other world underneath London. Our hero becomes involved with the folk of London Below, and becomes invisible to those Above. Epic quests ensue through sewers, cellars, and Underground stations. Clever puns work like dream-associations, rather than just jokes. At Blackfriars station there are these, well, Negro monks, who put our hero through an archetypal Test. It's all of a type with modern "urban fantasy," though I am also reminded of the rat city, Lankhmar Below, in Leiber's *The Swords of Lankhmar*. Colorful characters, wonderful dialogue, often flat descriptions. Gaiman writes a little too much like a screenwriter or comic-book writer at times, in that he seems to be expecting someone else to supply the visuals. But you will enjoy this.

Rating: ☆☆☆

To Say Nothing of the Dog

By Connie Willis

Bantam, 1998

493 pp., \$6.50

I'm going to be heretical, because this is a much-loved book which is likely to win a Hugo about the time you read this review, but I think it's too long. It's a time-travel comedy about an effort to rebuild Coventry cathedral. The structure is a playful parody of Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat*. Our befuddled hero is sent back into the Victorian era to find the Bishop's Bird Stump, a mysterious object which you will learn quite a bit

about by the time this is all over. It's a romp, filled with brilliant comic riffs and asides, but sometimes the narrative itself tends to get lost under the details. There's even some solid pseudo-science, a logic of time travel as good as anyone has ever worked out. But at times, I found my attention wandering. I can't help but feel that the book would have *really* sparkled at about 300 pages. But the pressure is for long books. Nobody is willing to edit a successful writer if she's willing to write long ... The Victorians had that problem too. Novels were expected to be "three-deckers," which ultimately developed a bad reputation for flabby writing.

Rating: ☆☆☆

Get a Life!

By William Shatner

(with Chris Kreski)

Pocket Books, 1999

321 pp., \$24.00

I'm going to be even more heretical by admitting that I enjoyed this. Sure, we've all seen *Star Trek*. It is the most universal of 20th-century franchise fictions, and I suspect it will remain recognizable for centuries to come. Therefore, believe it or not, William Shatner is an important cultural figure ... He also seems to be a guy who regarded going to *Star Trek* conventions as a professional duty, until they killed off Captain Kirk in the movies and there was no more duty. But meanwhile Shatner started lingering after his paid speeches, meeting fans, and gradually he became one of them. He tries to write a history of the phenomenon, making some mistakes as an outsider would. (He seems to think there is a convention in Cleveland every year, whereas the Tricon he refers to was the 1966 Worldcon, which was in New York the following year, called Nycon III.) There are some great anecdotes. The most astonishing one is an encounter with a multiple-personality woman who suffered terrible abuse as a child and now survives with the help of several *Enterprise* crew members inside

her head. Shatner is sympathetic, but appalled that he has been brought into such intimacy with the woman's pain.

The whole book seems to be written as an apology for the infamous "Get a Life!" *Saturday Night Live* skit of some years ago. After all, who has lived *Star Trek* on a daily basis more than Bill Shatner?

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

The SFWA Grandmasters, Vol. 1
Edited by Frederik Pohl
Tor, 1999
383 pp., \$24.95

This is an obvious sort of book which tends to be taken for granted the way major public utilities are taken for granted. Someone needs to praise Fred Pohl and Tor for giving us this collection of stories by the first five Grandmasters elected by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America: Robert Heinlein, Jack Williamson, Clifford Simak, Sprague de Camp, and Fritz Leiber. We are given a personal introduction by Pohl, who of course knew and worked with all these writers, then three or four items by each Grandmaster. Experienced fans will have read most of them, Heinlein's "Jerry was a Man" and "The Long Watch," Simak's "Desertion," de Camp's "A Gun for a Dinosaur" (but possibly not de Camp's "A Living Fossil," an intriguing choice, one of several de Campian stories which prefigured *Planet of the Apes* by decades), and so forth. But this book belongs in every library, for the benefit of readers who may *not* have previously read Simak or de Camp or Leiber, and may only know them by reputation, if at all. The past of our field can slip away so fast ...

Rating: ☆☆☆☆☆



Moving?

If you plan to move in the next three months, please be sure to let us know your change of address, as the U.S. Postal Service will only forward 2nd class mail for four weeks after a move.

EDITOR'S NOTES

By Charles C. Ryan

Welcome to issue No. 62 of *Aboriginal Science Fiction*.

Perceptive readers may have noticed that on the last issue's cover we stopped using the phrase "double issue". Even more perceptive subscribers may have noticed that the endsub# changed on their mailing label.

The reason for this is simple.

Ever since we started having double issues (issues 29-30), we have been entering new subscriptions into the computer at double the number of issues they actually called for. For instance, if you ordered a one-year subscription, or four issues, we entered eight into the computer to compute the endsub#, since each issue was a double issue. Otherwise a renewal for four issues would have only yielded two actual physical copies of the magazine (two double issues).

Now that we are no longer using the double-issue mode, we have returned to entering (or adding) four issues into the database for the endsub# for a four-issue subscription.

To equalize the endsub# for those who have extended subscriptions, we divided the number of unshipped issues by two and added that back to the base subscription number, giving everyone with a half a leftover issue an extra one.

The net result is that everyone will still get exactly the number of copies they ordered.

If that isn't how your endsub# ended up, please write to DNA Publications at P.O. Box 2988, Radford, VA 24143-2988.

Guidelines for a SASE

Aboriginal SF has free guidelines for writers and artists interested in getting their work published.

To get a copy of these guidelines, please send a SASE (Self-Addressed, Stamped Envelope) to:

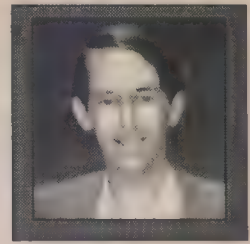
***Aboriginal SF* Guidelines**

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(PLEASE NOTE: We will only send the guidelines if a SASE is included. For those living outside the USA, please include a small return envelope and an IRC [International Reply Coupon] — available from your post office.) Or visit our web site at:

<http://www.aboriginalsf.com> and download a copy of the guidelines.



Distant World

As a boy, during the late '60s and early '70s of the Apollo era, I can remember standing in the backyard and staring up at the moon. It looked so near, as if I could reach out and pull it down out of the sky. A mere quarter of a million miles away. Traveling at the speed of light, those ghost-images of Armstrong and Aldrin bouncing across the dusty surface took less than a second to reach us.

And then later in college it was Mars that held my attention, that red twinkling speck that I could barely see from the light-polluted realm of Los Angeles. Viking landed in 1976, and right there on the evening news was the red Martian Landscape, a world 50 million miles away, so distant that it took those speed-of-light signals almost five minutes to reach us.

And what distant worlds do I look to now?

Have I moved farther out into the solar system, enamored by the gas giants which are light hours distant, or do I dream about the unseen worlds orbiting stars, distant worlds detected only by the wobbles observed in the positions of their stars?

Yes, I continue to look outward, to even more distant places.

But in the last decade, my attention has also turned nearer to home, to a distant world as alien and bizarre as any other found in our solar system, and quite possibly even those that will someday be found in distant solar systems. I've seen images from this place, in books and magazines, occasionally on TV, and recently even met some explorers who actually stood on this alien world.

This place is quite near.

From my office in Atlanta, Georgia, TV signals from this distant world take a mere 50 milliseconds to reach me — a time so short that I have no real physical perception of it. This alien world is so close that I can pick up my phone, punch in a sequence of numbers, and speak with the explorers who are currently visiting it. I can

go to the airport, pull out my credit card, book several flights, and in a few short days find myself flying over this distant world on a sightseeing tour courtesy of air carriers originating from Australia and New Zealand.

You know the distant world of which I'm speaking.

Antarctica.

So alien in so many ways.

The physical alienness of the place is the most apparent. It is the size of the US and Mexico combined. It is the highest, driest, windiest, and coldest of all the continents. In the interior, winter temperatures drop down to -100° F. And although you may have an image of blizzards and perpetual snow falling from the Antarctic sky, this is simply not the case. Most of Antarctica is a desert, receiving less than 3 inches of rainfall a year (this rainfall in the form of snow, of course). But over the millennia that Antarctica has been in the deep freeze this meager amount of precipitation, being compacted into ice, has formed an ice sheet that is up to 3 miles thick in places (which puts visitors at an altitude of at least 16,000 feet — where the air is starting to get thin). That ice represents 70% of all the fresh water in the world, and if melted and returned to the sea would raise sea levels by nearly 200 feet. In that event you could say good-bye to almost every coastal city in the world, and such places as Florida and Bangladesh would be permanently submerged. And despite the fact that winter in Antarctica consists of many months of total darkness (due to Earth's 22° tilt), the continual sunshine in the summer and the lack of much in the way of clouds results in more sunshine in that frozen land than Earth receives at the Equator.

All these characteristics certainly make Antarctica a strange and alien land, but there is more to its otherworldliness than the mere physical differences it has from the rest of the Earth. It is a place that we are only just now discovering. The other conti-

nents of this planet have been inhabited by man for times as long as millions of years (Africa), to times as short as only 10-20 thousand years (North and South America). But as compared to Antarctica, *all* of these other continents have been inhabited by man for immense stretches of time.

The first human sighting of Antarctica took place in 1820. It has barely been 100 years since humans managed to endure an Antarctic winter (and this was in the relatively balmy coastal regions). The first human footprint was placed on the South Pole 88 years ago by Roald Amundsen, just one year prior to the sinking of the Titanic. My grandfather was a young boy when both those events took place. Men stood on the moon a mere 58 years after we reached the South Pole.

But in many ways the strangest thing about Antarctica is what took place in 1959. In that year the Antarctic Treaty was signed, which stated that Antarctica should only be used for peaceful purposes, and that ordinary military activities, nuclear tests, and disposal of nuclear wastes were forbidden. The treaty also guarantees the free exchange of scientific ideas and information among the signing nations.

The treaty does not recognize the territorial claims made by any nations.

Imagine that. A chunk of land the size of the US and Mexico, and no one owns it, no one can plant a flag on it and kick someone else off. The spirit of this treaty goes against better than one million years of human exploration and exploitation. And 40 years later the treaty still holds, has in fact been strengthened. In 1991 the Treaty was expanded so that for the next 50 years all mining and oil drilling will be prohibited. Just how much longer can such a treaty actually hold? As more resources are discovered, will the powers that be manage to break this treaty as has been true of every other

treaty mankind has ever written? Or will Antarctica prove to be such a hostile and alien world that it will be just about impossible to squeeze a buck out of it?

Talk about distant worlds.

So just what does go on down there? It has no owners, has no citizens, and is physically and legally hostile to almost all modes of operation that man chooses in the pursuit of money and power. What's left?

Science.

There are now 60 bases strewn across the continent, and the summertime population swells into the thousands, the scientists there not only studying this most distant of continents, but also using it as a platform to study both space and the rest of our planet. The April 17, 1999 issue of *New Scientist* has devoted its entire issue to just what is going on in this distant world. I'll touch on just a few items to give you a flavor of this alien place.

History

The most obvious piece of history that comes to mind when Antarctica is mentioned is the race to the South Pole. This endeavor had many similarities to the US-Soviet race to the moon — the real driving force one more of egos, both national and individual, than the pure pursuit of exploration and knowledge. The race to the pole culminated in the summer of 1911-1912 between Amundsen from Norway and Scott from Britain. The Norwegians won the race by a scant four weeks. The trailing British reached the pole, but all froze to death before they could return to safety. Events such as these sold newspapers, as did the landing on the moon, but to examine the less publicized, less sound-bite oriented nature of early Antarctic exploration is to see the true nature of Antarctic exploration, and from that understand how it has evolved into what it is today.

Before the British made their tragic journey to the pole, they first wintered in 1911 at a place called Cape Evans, very near the coast and not far from the current location of the large US installation at McMurdo Station. Before going for the pole, it was necessary to get everything prepared during the harsh winter, so that as soon as the relatively good weather of the summer began, they would be ready to go. Bill Wilson was a member of

Scott's party. It was Wilson's theory that the Emperor Penguin was the most primitive bird in the world — was actually the missing link between birds and reptiles. He was convinced that by examining Emperor Penguin embryos he could prove this theory and gain great insight into how animals had evolved. However, there was a big problem with getting Emperor Penguin eggs. In 1911, there was only one place that such eggs could be found, and that was at the Cape Crozier rookery, nearly 100 kilometers from Cape Evans.

But that was not the real problem.

The impossible aspect of this task was that penguin eggs are laid in the winter. This meant that if Wilson wanted those eggs, he would have to walk all those miles in the middle of an Antarctic winter, in the pitch darkness, in temperatures nearly -80° F. There were no planes, no helicopters, no portable heaters, not even flashlights to aid on the trip. Three men left on the journey, which was chronicled by one of them, Apsley Cherry-Garrard, in his book entitled *The Worst Journey in the World*. It took the men 19 days to walk to the rookery, 19 days in total darkness, at times literally crawling past places with names such as Beyond Windless Bight and Terror Point. Upon their arrival they collected five eggs just as a storm struck and were forced to retreat into an igloo they had built over the previous four days. The walls of the igloo were made of rocks, but the roof was a canvas cloth tightly stretched and wedged into the sides. During the first night of the storm the canvas cloth was blown away, and the three men were trapped in the open igloo with nothing but their sleeping bags for protection. They lay there for two days, in total darkness, during the Antarctic winter, waiting for the storm to pass. And when it finally did, miraculously, all three were still alive, and they found their canvas tent neatly folded up, waiting for them less than one kilometer away from their destroyed igloo. All three men made it back to the main camp, with their precious Emperor Penguin eggs.

And what happened then?

Two of the three men froze to death that summer along with Scott in their journey back from the pole, while only Cherry-Garrard survived to tell the tale in his book and bring back the precious eggs. And what of those eggs?

It turned out there was nothing special about the embryos, nothing to link them to long extinct reptiles — they were simply the embryos of some big flightless birds. Those eggs now lie in an outpost of England's Natural History Museum in the Hertfordshire village of Tring, resting on a bed of cotton wool in a glass-lidded box.

Was the search for these eggs nothing more than an ill-fated journey, a tragedy driven by poor science and the quest to be first? I don't think so. I think this trip to the Emperor Rookery in the dead of an Antarctic winter, in the hope of discovering something new, of solving a scientific riddle (even if the riddle itself was a false one), helped set the stage of what would later come on this continent, of the willingness of scientists and countries to put both their resources and their lives on the line in the pursuit of science.

The Sky is Falling

Where is the best place in the world to take a little stroll, scan about the horizon in search of an interesting brown smudge, and then trot over to it and pick up a piece of material not-of-this-Earth? Well, I suppose the answer should be obvious, since this column is about Antarctica.

Antarctica is meteorite heaven.

Think about this. When a rock falls out of the sky and hits the ground, it can often be quite difficult to recognize this as a rock of extraterrestrial origin. If you hold a meteorite in your hand, it might be fairly easy to tell what you have if you know what you're looking for — a charred melted surface coupled with telltale crystals and grains. But the problem is to see it when it is on the ground. Now, if the thing was a real space boulder and generated a good-sized impact crater, then you know where to look. But if this rock landed a few years or even a few centuries back and is sitting strewn across a hillside with billions of other rocks, it is a bit hard to pick it out. It's like looking for one special type of needle in a needle stack.

But that's not the case in Antarctica. For the most part, Antarctica has no exposed rocks — just miles of ice. Drop a dark rock on a sheet of ice and it's pretty easy to see. But the situation is even better than that. What happens is that when the meteorite hits, it will slowly get buried in that scant 3 inches of snowfall a

year, and each year get buried deeper and deeper. But those meteorites don't just sink. The ice is always on the move, vast oceans and rivers of ice washing about the continent, crashing up onto submerged mountains (just like undersea mountain ranges) as well as some mountain peaks that break through the ice-sea. When this moving ice (moving slowly certainly, but still moving) runs into these immovable mountains, the meteorites are gathered together and pushed upward — sort of like seashells being dumped on the beach. So in certain locations — the so-called blue ice fields, which are either just above submerged mountain ranges, or butted up against protruding mountains — the meteorites come popping back up.

The job of picking up these extraterrestrial rocks is lead by ANSMET — the U.S.-funded Antarctic Search for Meteorites. In the 22 years since it began, they have found 8,000 meteorites. When you add the other meteorites found by Japanese and European Antarctic programs during the same time, scientists have come up with a total of 16,000 meteorites.

Is 16,000 a large number of meteorites?

Very large. That is the same number of meteorites as have been found throughout the rest of the world in the last *two centuries*. But it is not just a numbers game. The cold and nearly dead Antarctic environment is ideal for minimizing contamination of these rocks by Earth-type creatures. And this is very important when you are examining these rocks for signs of life.

ALH84001 is probably the most famous rock ever found in Antarctica — certainly the most controversial. This is a piece of Mars that was knocked off that planet and ended up spiraling into Antarctica. Does it show signs of fossilized Martian life? No one knows for sure, and most experts are starting to lean away from that possibility. But regardless, there it sits, a piece of Mars right on our planet, to study and analyze. The total count of Mars bits found so far in Antarctica stands around 13. In addition, there are even a few pieces of the moon that have been picked up on the ice. It makes you wonder what other heavenly tidbits might be waiting for us out there.

The Sky Fell

For those scientists who don't want to go scrambling over blue ice fields in search of Martian debris, there are other places to find a little slice of Mars.

I've painted an image of Antarctica which consists of miles-thick layers of ice and a few protruding mountain tops. But there is another unique piece of Antarctica terrain which would look more at home on Mars than it does on Earth: the Dry Valleys — small ice-free regions at the edge of the Antarctic continent. These small valleys are among the coldest, driest places on Earth, the closest thing that Earth has to Mars. On Mars, where the average temperature is -55°C , the surface is far too cold to support life as we would understand it — the low temperature and the lack of liquid water are just too nasty. However, the Martian surface was not always so hostile. Ancient Mars was much warmer and wetter than it is now — perhaps a place suitable for life. And could that life have survived as the climate deteriorated?

Antarctica is the perfect non-Mars lab to ask such questions.

Because Antarctica was also at one time a much warmer, friendlier place. In fact, before it drifted southward courtesy of continental plate tectonics, it was just as balmy as South America or Africa, complete with the forests and fauna that filled those other continents several hundred million years ago. But no longer.

Except for life that hugs the Antarctic beaches, supported by the nutrient-rich oceans, the land is extremely barren. The ice sheet offers no anchor for indigenous life. But the Dry Valleys are another matter. These valleys are called Dry because mountains at the heads of the valleys rise up and block the encroaching ice sheet, preventing it from crawling down the valleys and filling them. And in the floors of many of these valleys are ice-covered lakes. Despite the fact that the air temperature is typically a frigid -20°C , well below the freezing point of water, on warm summer days temperatures will get just high enough to thaw the edge of the encroaching glacier, and the resulting melt water filters into the underside of the ice-covered lakes (ice thickness of several meters). If not for this trickling input of water, and the fact that the layer of ice above actually acts as a thermal blanket to keep the water below isolat-

ed from the cold air, these lakes would soon freeze solid and then be slowly sandblasted away by the ice-laden winds that howl down the Dry Valleys.

The current state of these valleys may closely match what was taking place on the surface of Mars as it was dying. The question becomes, could life have retreated beneath the ice covered lakes? Might there still be a few surviving microbes beneath the Martian surface, hiding beneath the permafrost? Or perhaps all life is now gone, but such locations might be the most likely spots to look for microbial fossils.

How to answer those questions without actually going to Mars?

Look beneath the ice sheets of those Dry Valley Lakes.

And that is exactly what researchers are doing. And what do they find? Life. Beneath the ice are huge organic mats made of tiny cyanobacteria, held together by sticky mucus, anchored to the lake floors, and growing in strands up to 30 meters long.

What have the scientists learned? What clues do they have for finding evidence of life on Mars? What they have found is that large mounds of bacteria form beneath cracks in the ice, where these cracks let wind-driven particles and minerals get beneath the ice and float to the bottom of the lakes. Once the lakes completely freeze out and the ice is blown away, all that remains are frozen and then fossilized clumps of bacterial mounds, these things often reaching several meters in size.

So this is something for Martian robots to consider. As they go scurrying across long dead lakebeds in quest of ancient life, that bump in the road may be much more than simply a bump — it may be the remains of Martian life and the ideal place to dig for a sample.

Get Out of My Way

Now before you start to think that nothing goes on in Antarctica except for research into literal and virtual chunks of Mars, think again. The study of Antarctica has real and potentially catastrophic implications for each and everyone of us on this planet.

Imagine this.

The leading edge of glaciers moves. This should be no news to you. I'm sure that you've seen at least one or two *Love Boat* reruns in which the

boat makes an Alaska run and the *Brady Bunch* or *Gilligan's Island* reunion cast spend time watching massive slabs of ice cleaving from the wall of ice that rings Glacier Bay. Well, the same thing happens in Antarctica. As the interior snows slowly get compressed and turned into ice, there are only two places where that ice can go. It can either sit atop the ice sheet, slowly increasing its thickness, or start to flow laterally and eventually end up in the sea in the form of icebergs.

Antarctica is certainly quite adept at building up its ice sheet — in places it is miles thick. But it is equally adept at dumping excess ice into the ocean. You can think of a glacier as an extremely slow-moving river, one that is frozen, but one that flows downhill just as does any other river. A typical glacier might creep toward the ocean at a rate of 10 meters per year.

This is slow.

If you were so foolish as to stand at the cleaving face of a glacier, and put the tip of your nose a mere inch away from the wall of ice, you would have to stand there for an entire day before the glacier edged forward to touch your nose (in reality, the glacier front does not move so smoothly, but you get the idea). But in Antarctica, this is not necessarily the case.

The West Antarctic Ice Sheet (WAIS) expels its excess ice into the Ross Ice Sea. If all the ice in the WAIS were to roll into the Ross Ice Sea, the global sea level would rise by nearly 20 feet. This is significant. Many of the world's major coastal cities would find the oceans lapping at the second floors of their downtown buildings.

The route by which the ice in the WAIS makes its way into the sea is by way of five massive Ice Streams. Note that I did not call these Ice Streams glaciers. There is a reason for that. While a typical glacier might take an entire day to move a single inch toward the sea, these Ice Streams can move 60 times faster — that's five feet in a single day.

Think about that. Imagine, if you can, a wall of ice that is 50 kilometers wide and a thousand meters deep, and is moving at a rate of five feet a day — nearly half a mile each year. That is fast, but it could potentially be much faster. There is the potential for the entire Ice Stream to start moving like an avalanche and dump the entire Ice Stream into the ocean. This might not

happen over millennia or centuries, but in months or weeks.

Should you cancel that coastal Florida vacation you booked for next month?

That's what scientists in Antarctica are trying to determine.

What they have found is that a typical glacier is in essence glued to the bedrock beneath it, the interface between ice and rock a hard, abrupt region in which the ice is locked tightly to the rock. These glaciers move very slowly. But in the case of the Ice Streams something altogether different is at the interface between the ice and bedrock. Scientists have drilled through the Ice Streams to sample what lies down there.

Mud.

And this is not just any mud. This mud is supersaturated with water — you could not squeeze another drop of moisture into it. The mud is a wonderful lubricant. Think about what would happen if you took a block of ice up to the top of a hill made out of smoothed granite, coated the underside of the ice with a thick layer of grease or oil, managed to get up onto that block of ice, and then had your friend give you a shove. If you managed to keep your footing on the ice, you would find yourself sailing down the hill, frictionlessly accelerating, gaining speed and stopping only when you eventually hit a wall or went flying into the ocean.

That is what is happening in the Ice Rivers.

Despite the fact that the surface of the Ice River is at -20° C, well below the point at which any water would freeze, this is not the case at the muddy interface between the ice river and the bedrock.

Earth radiates heat, the energy rising up from its molten core. This heat is the primordial remnant of the original heat trapped in the planet as it coalesced nearly 5 billion years ago, combined with the heat generated by the decay of radioactive materials. When this heat is liberated, it gets trapped between the bedrock and the ice (despite the fact that ice is cold, it is a great insulator, so that it is very hard for heat to move through it). Enough heat gets trapped to melt just a bit of the underside of the glacier, forming a muddy layer. But that is only the beginning. When the first thin layer of mud forms, it allows the ice river to move. This moving of miles of ice generates a great deal of friction,

which in turn generates a great deal of heat. This heat in turn melts more of the underside of the Ice River, which creates more mud. More mud means that the ice river can move faster, which generates even more heat.

I think you see where this is going.

The research taking place right now on and below these Ice Rivers is to determine just how those mud interfaces are being generated. Are these ice Rivers already moving too fast, are they accelerating, and will they soon dump their entire contents into the Ross Sea? That question remains to be answered.

And if they are, is there anything we can do about it?

Probably not.

It would be highly unlikely that man could do anything to refreeze that muddy interface between the glacier and the bedrock. That's because the ice itself is a wonderful insulator that inhibits the flow of heat. I'm sure that at least a few of you must be thinking that all this Ice River melting is just one more example of how Global Warming is altering our environment.

Yes and no.

Most scientists do believe that the warmer environment is affecting the interface and is possibly generating more mud. But they are not referring to the warming environment that we have experienced over the last 100 years. Many scientists consider the trigger that has started these Ice Rivers moving is the global warming that started 10,000 years ago, as the entire planet emerged from the last Ice Age. When dealing with the insulating properties of ice, it takes millennia for changes in surface temperatures to travel through miles of ice.

So what does that mean?

The trigger on the WAIS may have already been pulled, may in fact have been pulled when mankind was building its first mud huts and planting its first seeds. And as long ago as that trigger might have been pulled, it might be only now that the bullet is leaving the barrel of the gun.

Stay tuned and keep your view to that distant world in the south — what is being discovered there may have staggering implications not only for this world, but for worlds beyond ours. □

A Fresh View Through the Lens



Forget *Star Wars Episode I*. That was 20 years of waiting for two hours of disappointment. The movie at the close of the millenium that made me happy to be an SF fan was "The Matrix," a fabulously stylish, engaging action film in the best SF style, which I see as an experiment: Create an altered



Clyde Duensing, III

world, see how persons react and let it tell you something about the human condition. In this case a gifted hero has to challenge the seductive but dangerous traps of material comfort, safety and complacency in order to save human society. And since this is SF, folks, there's sequels in store. I hear writer-directors **Larry and Andy Wachowski** envisioned a trilogy all along.

Okay, okay, while our alien publisher *appreciates* my attempt at movie criticism, he has somebody else in mind to give us the real low-down on what's up in Hollywood.



Terry McGarry

Our new "Through the Lens" columnist is **Marvin Kaye**, a critically acclaimed author, editor, playwright, and teacher. Kaye has written fifteen novels, including the best-selling *A Cold Blue Light* with Parke Godwin, six non-fiction books, and numerous short stories, anthologies, plays and screenplays. He founded The Open Book, New York's oldest professional readers theatre company, in 1975, and continues to be its artistic director. And he is Adjunct Professor of Creative Writing at New York University.

Kaye does not believe talent is a "mysterious unteachable gift," and, in fact, he has set out to teach the basics of creativity to hundreds of Manhattan fifth-graders through playwriting.

Living in a small fishing town can be uncomfortable when half the neighbors are hostile aliens, as we find in "Locals," by **Dennis Fisher**. This was Fisher's first professional sale, and he has since written some non-fiction, including "The Homebrewer's Garden." Fisher is an organic farmer who recently bought a spread in Maine. He likes to make beer, sail, and he recently built his own computer. Look for more from Fisher in forthcoming *Aboriginal* issues.

"Locals" is illustrated by **Clyde Duensing**, who is knee-deep in 3-D animation these days. He just finished a CD project with a friend, and says he loves the 3-D animation applications so much he is putting elements of them into his 2-D art. He has also been going to computer conferences that highlight computer technology in the entertainment media, such as Siggraph, which took place in LA in August.

A girl in every port is such a dated concept. Make it "A Girl in Every Universe," by **Terry McGarry**. That way she can be the same girl, sort of.

McGarry is the author of numerous short stories and poems, including the stories "Syrinx" (Aboriginal #47-48) and "For Fear of Little Men"

(Aboriginal #26). Her recent works include "Mistweaver" in *Sword and Sorceress XVI* edited by **Marion Zimmer Bradley**, and "Terminal Moraine" for *The Magazine of Speculative Poetry*. Her bibliography, I can't help noticing, includes a story in the current book *The Resurrected Holmes*, edited by none



Larry Blamire

other than our new "Through the Lens" columnist Marvin Kaye. McGarry is also a professional copy-editor in the publishing world, and has written several articles about copyediting.

"A Girl in Every Universe" is illustrated by **Larry Blamire**, who recently celebrated his one-year anniversary with bride **Jennifer**. While Jennifer just shot a European commercial for "Always," Larry has been busy with his virtual art. Chapter 1 of his *Wise-eye Guys* animated interactive mystery adven-

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Jael



Carrie Martin

ture series just went up at Balihighway.com. He wrote it and drew the many pictures. Look for seven more chapters forthcoming. And he is continuing his "Dr. Pullover's Carnival of Miracles" series of full color, e-mailable all-occasion virtual cards, also on Balihighway.com. Blamire says "In them I've tried to capture the look of my paintings, only all done digitally in Photoshop — just like all my recent *Aboriginal* stuff."

In **Carrie Martin's** "Beating the Sweeps" teenagers must risk a hazardous cross-country race to gain freedom. Martin made her first professional sale with the story "Eighty Shen" in *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine* in 1995. That was one year after her kids dared her to get published. She did some research and discovered writing SF/fantasy/horror was the easiest way to get her foot in the published door, and she's been writing one or two stories a month ever since. The photo of her is a glamour shot her kids got her for Christmas. She says "Okay, the jewelry's fake, so's the dress, and the hair is once in a lifetime — you're a fiction magazine, aren't you?"

"Beating the Sweeps" is illustrated by **Jael**, whom I caught up with as she was finishing her latest cover for a series of children's books she is illustrating for Scholastic. She hired two former students from her Montclair Art Museum classes to do some interior inkings. One of them, **Sean**, is now a freshman at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. Jael has found another use for her popular series of books on how to draw such things as angels, super villains, super heroes, aliens and UFOs. She is taking the books and stuffed animals to a nearby Children's Burn Center. She was also looking forward to a big party

she was planning for her husband **Greg's** retirement from the police force.

The news these days is full of stories of web relationships and steamy internet romances. In "Tryst," by **Janis O'Connor**, virtual sex is *de rigueur*. O'Connor is the author of "Deathsong" in *Aboriginal* issue #45-46. When I spoke to her, she was just back from a writers workshop in Halifax called Gypsycon and was putting the finishing touches on another story. She was looking forward to Philcon in mid-November and was busy with volunteer work. O'Connor, by the way, is such a good swimmer; she was once paid to swim in a show called "Wonder World," starring **Chita Rivera**.

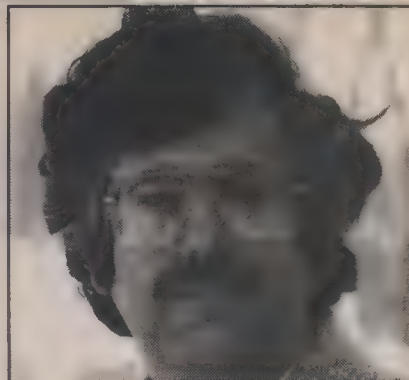
"Tryst" is illustrated by **Jael**.

"Sundials," by **Chuck Rothman**, is based on a true relationship between Rothman's grandfather and the great man himself, **Albert Einstein**. Rothman says it took him quite some time to figure out a way to build a story around the actual incidents. You can read more about it on his web page at www.sff.net/people/rothman. Recently, Rothman had stories appear in *Absolute Magnitude* and *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine* at the same time. He has also taken over as business manager of the *SFWA Bulletin*, and has been very involved in Albacon. In real life Rothman is the webmaster at Siena College in Loudonville, NY. But he's most proud of the fact that his daughter Lisa has been winning all sorts of academic awards, including principal's award for best student at her middle school.

"Sundials" is illustrated by **Cortney Skinner**. He was working on a cover and interiors for the novel



Kevin M. Carr



Chuck Rothman

Through a Brazen Mirror by **Delia Sherman** for Circlet Press when I spoke to him. The other project he is devoting his time to is a real historical mystery unfolding at Balihighway.com. He has come into a collection of documents and items about the Boston Museum of Natural History, which has been defunct for more than half a century, but which may have its origins as far back as the 17th century. As he delves into old trunks and folders of photos and documents, Skinner posts them on the web so the public can virtually rummage along with him and also help with identification. He is keeping a daily journal of what's been discovered, and hopes to eventually write a formalized history of the museum.

A dead creative genius of the 20th century gets brought back to life for political purposes in "The Satini Solution," by **Kevin M. Carr**.

The story is the outgrowth of an alternate history Carr created in "The Ballad of Heroin Pig Sam" which appeared in *The Mage* #13 (Fall 1990). Carr lives in Hawaii, where he has been working on sequels to "The Satini Solution," plays in a band and enjoys camping and role playing games.

"The Satini Solution" is illustrated by **Jael**.

Our cover art is the second in a row by English artist **Chris Moore**. Moore's works will be among those featured in *The Art of the Millennium* being published by Harper Collins this year. Moore is a Royal College of Art graduate who has done numerous book, magazine and record covers, for companies including Dell and Random House. He lives on a hill in Lancashire with wife **Katie**, a hospital consultant, and two of his four children, **Georgia** and **Harrison**. □

Sundials

By Chuck Rothman

Art by Cortney Skinner

"When I examine myself and my methods of thought, I come to the conclusion that the gift of fantasy has meant more to me than my talent for absorbing positive knowledge." — Albert Einstein

He introduced himself as Murray Vole, a short, pudgy man, five-foot-four in his shabby shoes, with a face that reminded me of a squirrel — buck teeth and all. Even the way he came up to my desk was like a small rodent sniffing the air for danger.

"I need your help," he said as though I were going to contradict him. "I want you to find a missing person."

I had him sit down. I was low man at the agency, and didn't often meet with clients. It was a welcome change of pace, especially after spending an entire morning going through forty-year-old tax records at City Hall.

Despite what people think, being a private investigator is no more glamorous than being a plumber. Now I had to deal with someone else who had read too much Raymond Chandler. "Then you should be talking to the police, not me."

"Yes. The police." He seemed even more uncomfortable, if that was possible. "The police have not been helpful, I'm afraid. I need to try ... other methods."

"I can't guarantee we'd do any better."

"Oh, understood, Mr. Benhaim. Understood." He smiled as though we had come to some sort of agreement.

I took a pad from my desk. Might as well get down the information; I could pass it off to someone else. It wasn't my job, which usually involved searching through records and databases for information, or calling up secretaries and pretending to be a friend of their boss, just to see what secrets they'd accidentally spill. No murders or missing persons, and my one main talent for the agency seemed to be an ability to tell stories convincingly. "Who are you looking for?"

"Albert Einstein."

I put down the pen. "Einstein?"

"Yes. A physicist. Formulated the Theory of Relativity. His most famous equation is $E = mc^2$."

"I know who Einstein was." Better than many. I stood up. "I'm really very busy right now. Perhaps if you —"

"You think I'm some kind of nut, don't you?"

"No, of course not."

"I need to find him."

"Well, you might try Princeton, New Jersey. Ask around the cemeteries. He died 35 years ago."

He looked almost as though he was going to cry. "I'm looking for the *real* Einstein. Alive, not dead." He pulled his billfold from his pocket and began to fumble through it.

"Look, Mr. Vole. Einstein *can't* be alive. He'd be over a hundred years old."

"One hundred and fourteen," said Vole, picking out a photo. It was bent and scored as though he had shown it to thousands of people. "Look at this."

I was thinking of calling for help to throw him out, but the image caught my eye. It was Einstein, all right: the wild white hair, the leonine face and placid eyes. He was standing on the edge of a small knot of people, as though he had been passing by when the camera went off.

Vole pressed his finger beside the head of a teenage boy with a forced smile. "Take a look at what's on his head."

I did. It was a black baseball cap, the letters "C" and "R" printed on it.

"Einstein supposedly died in 1955," Vole said. "That's a Colorado Rockies cap. The team didn't exist until 1992. You could buy the caps before then, but —"

I stared at the image. I recognized the location: the South Mall in Albany. Something else that didn't exist while Einstein was alive. "It's a fake," I said.

"I assure you it's not. I know he's somewhere near here, but I've done all I could on my own. I need a professional."

I didn't know what to say. Despite the absurdity of his claim, I believed him. It was a heck of a lot of trouble to go to for just a joke. "You think I can track him down?"

"I don't know. But I'd like you to try."

"Well, ... before I agree to anything, I have to know why you need to see him. It's a lot of money to spend on a probable wild goose chase."

Vole told me about how he lost his job at the bank for all this Einstein talk, and that the truth was the only thing that would get him reinstated. "Please, Mr. Benhaim. I need someone's help."

I considered things for a minute. "Let me think



about it."

It seemed to satisfy him. He scribbled a number on a sheet of scratch paper. "Call me."

I nodded, but was too busy staring at the photo to notice he had left.

When I got to my apartment that evening, I went right to the bookcase, searching for an oversized paperback that showed old photos of Long Island. I turned to the last page and laid Vole's photo beside the one in the book.

Albert Einstein looked out of two pictures: Vole's, and another, showing him sitting on the side of a boat, beached sideways. The boat's name, I knew was *Tinef* — Yiddish for "junk." He held a pipe and wore shorts and a pair of sandals.

And next to him, smiling and wearing a suit, was my grandfather, David Benhaim.

The photo was something of an icon in my family, the remnants of a brush with history. My grandfather had been, for a short time, a friend of Einstein's.

Not that he was a scientist. He ran a store on the eastern end of Long Island — too big to be called a general store, yet too small for its name of Benhaim's Department Store. And, in the summer of 1939, Einstein came to town, like so many other tourists, to spend the summer near the water. One day in June, he came into the store.

My grandfather recognized him at once, of course. He hurried over to greet him, asking how he could help, trying to treat him like any other customer.

"Do you have any sundials?" Einstein had asked, his words colored by his strong German accent.

My grandfather was stumped. He carried lots of items — a grab bag of things from fishing tackle to guitar picks, from toasters to toys, from squid to damp-proof salt shakers. But no sundials. "Well," he said, always the salesman, "I don't have any for sale, but I do have one of my own. I'll show you. If you want it, you can borrow it."

Einstein followed my grandfather outside to the sundial near my grandmother's garden. He stared at it, confused for a moment, then began to laugh heartily. "No," he said, then pointed at his feet. "Sundials." He pointed again. "Sundials."

My grandfather finally understood. Not sundials. Sandals. Those he had.

It was the type of introduction that gets two people talking, and they talked. As soon as Einstein discovered my grandfather played the violin, he invited him to play a duet.

So the two men became friends. Their one attempt at music didn't last to the end of one Bach concerto — Einstein was so much better, and my grandfather so nervous in his presence

that he couldn't keep up — but they managed to find things to talk about. My grandfather hadn't attended high school, but he had an interest in science, and would talk to Einstein about his work. He once asked Einstein to explain relativity — but without using any mathematics. Einstein couldn't, finally jotting down a complicated formula that no one but a physicist could understand.

"No math," my grandfather reminded him.

"But this is so trivial!" Einstein replied.

The two remained friends the entire summer, but when fall came, Einstein went back to Princeton and never returned. They kept up an occasional correspondence until Einstein's death.

And every year, my grandfather sent him a pair of sandals.

I shut the book and thought about Vole. I would only be humoring a crazy man.

And I still find it hard to think of myself as a detective. I do it because I get a kick out of learning new information, not out of any desire to solve mysteries. I had drifted into the profession almost accidentally, discovering one day that my talent for research and for using a computer made me useful. Heck, I didn't even like a lot of the work. There were too many gray areas; I'd be happier doing something more positive.

But my curiosity was piqued. I decided to call Vole in the morning.

It's not easy finding someone, especially if that someone wants to remain hidden. A database search wasn't going to help, and I had no idea where to look in the first place. Vole only knew that Einstein was somewhere here in the Capital District, but that was it.

I read a few biographies as I spent a few days thinking about it, trying to find an angle. I had my father send me copies of as much of my grandfather's Einstein material as he could find. He still tended the store, along with my brother, and seemed to think I had thrown my life away here upstate.

I started with the letters. I had known about them, of course, but I had never actually read them. They were fascinating: Einstein explaining how he had thrown out the original manuscript on relativity when it was published, judging it worthless. Einstein thanking my grandfather for yet another pair of sandals, protesting that the previous ones were still in fine condition. And one other letter, the most famous of the lot, written not to David Benhaim, but to President Roosevelt: the letter urging the development of the atomic bomb. It was written that same summer, from the house my grandfather visited. The place, even today, was referred to as "The Einstein House."

It's funny. The Einstein stories never meant

much to me when I was growing up; they were just a part of my family, like the story of how my father fainted at his wedding. But now that my grandfather was gone, I appreciated them in ways I never could have before. I felt a lot of admiration as I read the words.

After the letters came the photos. There was the one by the *Tinef*, and another, perhaps taken on the same day, showing Einstein and my grandfather walking down the beach together. And a picture of Einstein seated next to my grandmother's piano, violin in hand, looking at the camera with an expression both serious and playful.

You had to wonder what the world would have been like if he had gone into music instead of physics.

That's where I got my first idea.

Proctor's Arcade was, I suppose, a 1920s version of a shopping mall: a group of stores in a long indoor corridor that led to the box office of Proctor's Theater, a classic old movie palace. The theater was still in operation, but most of the stores in the Arcade were closed. Still, Van Curler Music thrived.

I don't know whether it was because of inertia or just good luck, but it was one of the few sheet music stores still in operation. I went through the bins, searching for a few minutes in the Bach file, then went to the clerk, a man in his sixties who was silently conducting to the sound of a classical music station.

"I'm looking for something by Bach for violin," I said.

The man had given me a fishy look until I mentioned Bach; then he beamed. "Anything in particular?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "I heard it played a week ago, but all I knew was that it was Bach. The guy who was playing it said he got the sheet music here."

"What was his name?"

I gave a sheepish look. "I didn't catch it. He was, oh, older than you, with white hair and a mustache. Spoke with a German accent." I smiled, pretending to be embarrassed that all I could give him was such vague information. "He might be a regular customer."

The man shrugged. "If he is, I don't know him."

"Maybe someone else helped him."

"Not likely. I'm always here."

I tried not to let my disappointment show. "I see." It had only been a starting place. There would be others.



"German accent," the man muttered. He shook his head. "No. The only German to buy Bach recently was a tourist."

I perked up. "Tourist?"

"He was here yesterday. Said he was staying up Schroon Lake way."

I shook my head. "No," I said, glad to get my first lead. "That's not him."

Schroon Lake was a two-hour drive up the Northway, an Adirondack lake surrounded on all sides by tourists. In a way, it seemed a logical place to find Einstein in the summer: he had loved the water.

I visited a few stores in the village, asking around. No one recognized him from my description.

Worse, a group of German tourists had discovered the area that summer, so the accent was no clue.

I had to remind myself not to expect miracles. There was no reason to believe I'd even find Einstein at all.

I kept at it. I drove around the lake, stopping at each beach, checking the docks for anything that might point me on my way. There's a lot of waterfront on a lake ten miles long, and I think I covered nearly all of it.

After six hours, I found it: a sailboat. The name was *Tinef II*.

After that, it was simple. A few questions, and I was soon outside a small tourist cabin.

I smiled as I got out of my car. Not far from the front door was an old sundial.

There was a long pause after my knock before I thought I heard footsteps.

"Dr. Einstein?" I said. "I'm Charles Benhaim."

No one spoke, but I had the impression someone was listening. "My grandfather was David Benhaim. I need to talk to you."

Again a long silence. Then, a voice spoke, soft and gentle, with a strong German accent. "If you are David's grandson, he probably told you about Einstein."

"Many times."

"Did he tell you about the time Einstein tried to sail his boat over to meet him?"

I knew that story like all the rest. "You didn't show up. He was terrified you might have capsize and drowned. Then someone called him about a weird looking guy who needed a haircut

sitting on the beach and asking for him."

I waited for an answer. It came when the lock was thrown back and the door opened.

It was Einstein. My first thought was that his head was enormous, but that was partially due to his wild, white hair. His eyes were soft and warm, though, twinkling as though they knew secrets the rest of the universe never guessed at. Something about the way he stood reminded me of my grandfather. Einstein smiled. "Yes," he said. "I can see the resemblance. You are David's grandson." The idea seemed to give him some satisfaction. "Come in, now. Come in."

"Dr. Einstein," I said, shutting the door behind me. "I have a lot of questions."

"Call me Albert," he said.

It seemed like a sacrilege.

"You don't play the violin by any chance, Mr. Benhaim?"

I shook my head.

Einstein sighed. "I'm sorry to hear that. I would like very much to play a duet. It gets very ... lonely when you can only play by yourself."

The interior was small, but cozy, with windows that looked onto the lake. He motioned for me to sit in one of the wicker chairs, and took the other himself.

"May I ask how you found me?"

He fiddled with his pipe as I told him the entire story, from the Colorado Rockies photo, to the visit to the music store, to here. He asked a few questions, as though it was important he know all about it.

"So," he finally said, sitting back, "How is your grandfather?"

I hesitated. "He died in 1981."

Einstein looked sad. "Of course. I should have guessed. All this business gets very confusing."

"Time travel?"

The question got an approving nod. "You are quite bright, Benhaim. Yes, it is what might be termed time travel."

"How do you do it?"

His eyes twinkled. "Do you want the explanation with or without mathematics?"

I laughed. "Without."

"You Benhaims make it very difficult for me," he said with a grin. "But it is all an outgrowth of my Unified Field Theory. You know of it?"

"I've heard of it, but I don't know anything about it."

"Well, it doesn't matter. Space and time are one continuum, yes? Well, I realized there was a way to travel in time as one does in space. It was quite simple, really. Trivial." He smiled for a moment. "All it takes is a small device. I built such a device." He seemed proud to make that admission. "If you could imagine me in a workshop. All my life, I was a theoretician, but it was

fascinating to be involved in something practical for a change."

"But ... excuse me, but I thought the Unified Field Theory was a dead end."

Einstein nodded. "I let people believe that. Believe me, I knew that most physicists thought I was wasting my life chasing it down. I could have published and shown them all wrong." I wasn't sure if he regretted the fact, or that he was just stating it without any emotional resonance. "I didn't."

"Why not?"

He was thoughtful for a moment. "When I was visiting Long Island, I wrote a famous letter."

I nodded. "To President Roosevelt."

"Yes. I urged the president to build an atomic bomb." He paused for a very long time. "I now regret very much that I sent that letter."

"The bomb would have been built anyway."

"Perhaps. But I would have felt better if I hadn't been involved."

He shook his head as though to banish his regrets. "When I invented the device, I did not want that to happen again. It could create more damage than any atomic bomb. Insidious damage."

"Or create good," I pointed out.

"That depends on who was using it. And I knew that, sooner or later, the wrong person would get his hands on it. So I didn't publish. I destroyed my notes and kept the device secret."

He smiled sheepishly. "But I could not resist the temptation to see the future. So I visited — not here, but many years from here. I found out I wasn't as clever as I thought. Someone had discovered my principles. As soon as I realized that, I had the sad feeling that I had once again set something very unpleasant into the world."

"But this time," Einstein said, "I could do something about it..."

He told me about his efforts to hide the discovery, dashing through time to prevent papers from falling into the wrong hands, or little diversions so that his biographers wouldn't stumble onto where his research was leading. "Nothing violent," he said several times, his face screwing up in distaste at the idea anyone might think otherwise.

"It is an unceasing battle," Einstein said. "And I have no taste for it. I am an old man, and soon I must die. That's why I am visiting this time — enjoying a pleasant summer before I return to my own time. And perhaps, that's why you are here."

"Me? What do you mean?"

"You are here to take over for me."

"What?"

"You are very much like your grandfather," Einstein said. "I know I can trust you. I will have to make a few changes before I go home," Einstein

said. "Leave the clues you told me about. Otherwise, you won't find me."

I was now completely lost. "You haven't done any of that yet?"

He shook his head. "I have never been in that music store."

"But don't you have to change things before I can find the trail?"

"No, I do not." He sighed. "Sometimes I think the worst thing about the device is what it has done to causality. The bullet can kill you before the gun is fired, or even made. I find that very untidy." He sighed for a moment, then took another puff on his pipe.

"I have enjoyed this conversation greatly, but I'm afraid we've talked about as long as it is safe."

"Safe?" I wanted to spend as much time as possible with him.

"There are others who want my invention. I have no doubt they have followed you here; despite my efforts, they have guessed about its existence." He smiled. "And, of course, I am not exactly difficult to recognize. I am certain they picked you because they knew about your grandfather and thought it would give them a chance to surround me. The man who hired you is a dangerous man."

I thought about Vole and laughed. "He's about as dangerous as a hamster. It's laughable."

Einstein looked grave. "When I was in Germany, we laughed at Hitler and the Nazis."

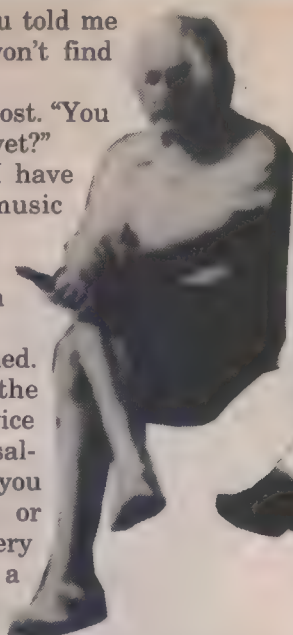
"But this isn't —"

"We all thought they were a joke; certainly nothing dangerous." He looked sad. "Then, one day, we woke up to discover that every time we laughed, someone slapped our faces." He waved a finger at me. "Do not underestimate the danger of your task, Benhaim."

"My task? I haven't —" The door burst open and Vole entered, a gun in his hand. "Don't move, Professor Einstein," he shouted. He looked even more rodentlike with a gun in his hands — exactly like a cornered rat. "I want the device." Einstein regarded him calmly. "Where is it, Professor? Or do I have to shoot your visitor here?"

"Where is it?" Einstein, rising from his chair, pipe in hand. He looked at Vole, then at me, and an impish grin appeared on his face. "In the sundial," he said.

Einstein touched the side of his pipe. There was a flash of light, and he was gone.



Vole, of course, took Einstein at his word. He rushed out of the cabin as soon as he realized what had happened, going for the sundial on the front lawn.

I waited until he was gone, then walked quickly to the nearest closet. On the floor was a pair of sandals.

The device is simple to operate, not surprising given Einstein's well-documented inability with machines. It is about the size of a credit card and seems to be powered all by itself, as though he converted matter to energy directly. He left me detailed instructions, telling me about the task I have ahead of

me. I keep staring at it. All my life, it seems, I had been drifting along, until I finally reached this moment.

Or, perhaps, until someone guided me to it. Someone like me.

I'm going back. Einstein was right: the device is just too dangerous. Someone was going to have to keep it out of the wrong hands. I'll guide my own past so that I become a private eye, so I'll be ready when I guide Vole to me.

I would carry on Einstein's work, and in a small way, follow in his footsteps. Or sandals, if you will.

But there's one thing I want to do first.

I'm going back to visit my grandfather. It's been too long. □

— For David Rothman, my grandfather.

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The Satini Solution

By Kevin M. Carr

Art by Jael

Gregor ... Gregor listen to me. This is your Jung-Sac speaking through direct axonic stimulation. You are in a coma, and have suffered serious head trauma. You're going to be all right. We're going to need your help, though. What I want you to do is remember your last assignment.

"That's easy, it's how I got my ass kicked."

Fine. We've worked together before, so you know what I want. Tell me everything that comes to mind. As always, axonic stimulation will make your memories more vivid, to help me understand your perceptions of events.

"I remember my previous sessions."

Excellent. Whenever you're ready, then.

"My last assignment began with a dream."

I watched Satini drain life fluid from the old one. As the blood left him it dripped into a plastic bucket on the floor. An iron heart kept a steady rhythm, echoing off the concrete walls of the hidden basement surgery of St. Mary's Hospital. The body underwent perfusion with injections of an isotonic solution containing five percent Dextran and three hundred milligrams heparin. Body temperature, critical in the most literal sense, was reduced with ice packs and a DMSO and glycerol combination. Primitive methods, but I knew they would work.

They had to work! I willed the process to completion, wishing every shard of Satini's doubt from his unsteady hands. As the work proceeded he seemed to gain my confidence. The thin sheen of perspiration above dark black eyebrows was wiped away — and did not reappear. He removed his surgical mask and smiled as perfusions filled the cadaver's pleural and abdominal cavities. At last the body was wrapped in plastic and immersed in dry ice in preparation for cold sleep.

What had happened here never happened — I reminded Satini of that fact.

"I know the terms of my obligation," he said, his voice rising indignantly. "I will honor my contract without harassment."

God save you, Satini, you are a man of honor. God save you too, Mr. Disney.

I woke from the dream, remembering only primitive surgical techniques and a plastic bucket full of ... tomato juice? I turned to go back to sleep.

In another time I would have been a cartoonist.

Yes, an artist of the absurd. To make people laugh, forget their problems, that would be good. Today I am a soldier — everyone is.

I've got a few talents that serve me well off the battlefield, and this has kept me from being fodder in the Ocean States war. Because I'm not a good fighter, I am alive. The casualties are high, though. One day even I might be called. These are crucial times.

Still, off time should be off, and subversive though that thought was, it was undeniably there when I cued the phone that had naggingly dragged me from sleep. "Yes," I said, pulling a blanket over my body as the C.O. glared down from the ceiling monitor.

"Get down to St. Mary's, Anaheim." For some reason he smirked — a jagged hiccup of stifled mirth. My next job would have something wrong with it.

"You're sending me to Disneyland?"

"I'll send you to the Ocean States if you screw up. You've been assigned to a revival team."

Favor duty! Good food and no one out to kill you. I wondered which bureau had glitched. "Who's the cool pop? And what's the catch?"

"Disney, Walter Elias. Chilled down 1966." He frowned. "I don't know what the catch is, but you can count on it being there."

"Thanks." I numbly reached to disconnect. 1966? My finger hovered above the button, and I looked again at the radiation-withered face of my C.O. "How long was the inducer on me last night?"

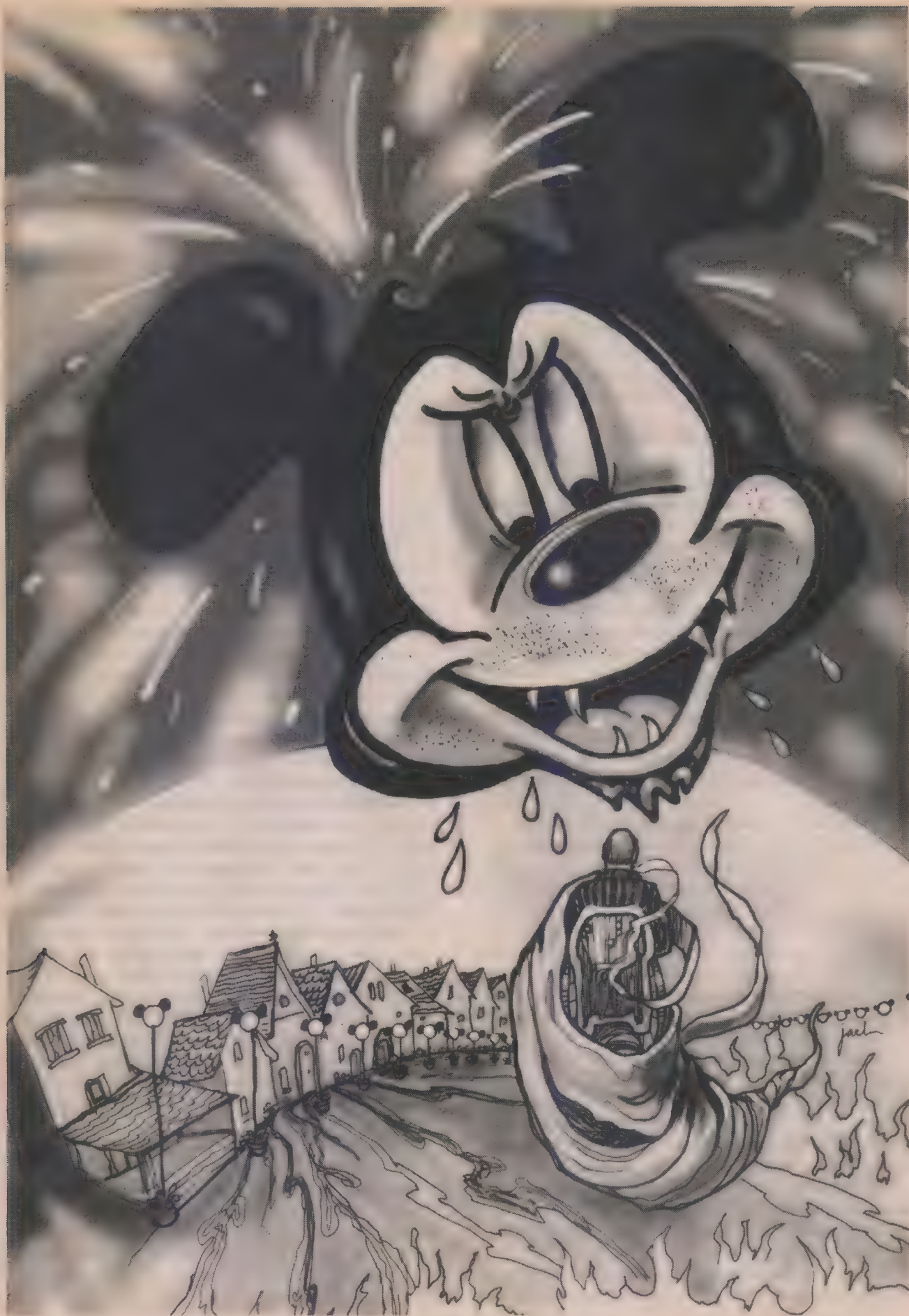
"About an hour." His broad black face was a mass of stress lines, arching sharply downward. "The dreams were mandatory, Satini. They may be again upon assignment resolution." The phone went blank.

Sleep conditioning was one of my least favorite things about the job. I had barracks-mates, long gone, who were bound for the Ocean States. They woke screaming rage from their Fedgov dreams, and I've had no love for the machines since. I signed a waiver upon induction, though, and until I can buy out my option, the Fedgov gives me any dreams it has to.

This one was a whopper. I had witnessed Walt Disney's preparation for cold sleep. The bucket of blood in a hidden basement operating room, the pumps, the surgeon named Satini. An ancestor? The data banks would tell if I ever cared to look it up.

"Could you look it up for me?"

No problem, Gregor. For now could you continue



with your story?

First thing was to get to Disneyland. I dressed hurriedly and picked up my grub ration on the way to the parking garage. Steven Gronder, a friend, was just pulling his old four-door into its stall as I reached the garage. He got out, the plasteel chassis creaking loudly as the heavy load of his body touched cement. He smiled and clapped me on the shoulder. "How about a war game tonight? Ocean States hostage situation, squad level, rescue team equipped with Digger Suits." He pushed thick sunglasses upwards on a sweaty face.

"Like to, Steve," I lied, "but I'll probably be gone a while. Tonight, anyway." He glowered, nodded his understanding, and didn't ask for details. As he walked away, I felt as if our friendship entitled him to more time than I could give. I got into my car and left.

The freeways were dotted with sparse rush hour traffic. Like all soldiers with the opportunity present, I catnapped. The steady whine of the car's tires became the hum of a spacecraft. Stars filled my eyes, their light warping to rainbow as the prism of the ship's hull diffracted and utilized their energy. Alone, the freedom of Einstein's circular forever lured me to a goal that called with siren persistence. "Destination approaching," whispered a flowing Valkyrie voice, which became louder, mechanical, and more persistent. "Destination approaching. Destination E.T.A., five minutes."

I snapped my eyes open and pressed the alarm acknowledgment. God, was that one of my own dreams? It had to be — escape imagery came flying every time I got a new assignment. No need for a Jung-Sac to analyze that one; even in sleep I yearn for retirement.

"What do you think of my self-analysis?"

It's interesting, Gregor. Try to forget I'm here, if you can, and let the memories flow.

Greater Disneyland, which my C.O. still called Anaheim, was the sprawling retirement home for thousands of federal employees. "Main Street, U.S.A." had spread like the tendrils of a concrete and plastic vine, growing into a city modeled on an average Midwestern town circa 1902. The effect was spoiled by a massive environment dome for sports events, and the tinted glass required for ozone outs. I wanted to retire somewhere far, far away from this garish fantasy.

St. Mary's Hospital was where Disney had died, and where he had been frozen, in secret, using the Satini method. It looked nothing like my dream. I asked directions from a harried receptionist, expecting to be shown the basement. She looked up at me and smiled. "The basement?" Looked like the first funny thing she had heard in a while. "Mr. Disney is waiting for you in room 506."

Dream conditioning can prepare you for certain circumstances and leave you looking like a baka in

others. I grinned foolishly at the receptionist and took my leave, trying to dredge up anything that could help me face Disney. I kept flashing to the bucket of blood.

I've always believed that the mind is the resting place of the soul. The Satini method would scar and ravage that resting place, despite its attempts to avoid crystallization damage.

But not beyond repair, apparently, since the biotechs had decided to thaw him. Or would they reconstruct him, using a new body for Disney's brain? I flashed my ident wristlet to the guard in front of 506 and walked in to find out.

The smell, Jesus Christ, that smell. It wasn't a reconstruction job; that was obvious as I entered the dimly lit room. The cloying, sickly-sweet stench of rotting fat cells always evokes images of the dead and dying that the war has ingrained on my psyche. Disney was a victim of the war as much as any of us. The man sitting before me, undergoing perfusions completely different from the ones that had prepared him for the crude ice coffin of his day, was the real thing: Disney — alive, whole, fellow victim.

The narco-genetic plasmas that the support chair infused his battered cells with would repair and revitalize him to a point approaching normalcy, but for now Disney was a wraith, and I wished the dream conditioning had been more graphic. I cleared my throat and announced my presence. "I am Captain Gregor Satini, sir. I've been assigned to help you adjust to your new life."

I stood stupidly at attention, waiting for a reply. The stench in the room washed around me in vaporous waves, threatening to pull the breakfast ration from my stomach.

His pale blue eyes found me, locking onto my face in bleary contemplation. "I want chili," he said, his voice wheezing across shattered vocal chords, "and I want ..." the eyes lost their focus, and a trickle of spittle fell from the corner of his pasty mouth, "a cheeseburger." His head lolled downwards. I thought he had passed out, but then his face snapped up to look again, and the eyes were brighter. He slowly smiled, drug-numbed gray lips cracking from the effort, and his right eyebrow crept upward. "I'm sorry ... but I'm really hungry."

I had heard of those foods, and the thought churned my stomach. Charred cow flesh wasn't what I needed to be thinking of at the moment. "I'll get them for you, sir." I turned to leave, not wanting to vomit in front of him.

"Captain," he said, and I turned back. "Was Ub Iwerks frozen too?"

"Sir, he wasn't. I'm afraid you're the only one from your team, and your family." I shut the door quietly behind me, unable to stand the smell any longer. He could cry without me watching.

The guard outside was grinning. "Stinks, doesn't he, sir." The marine's attitude made me angry. I felt

the old man in the room was mine to defend — in a way my partner. I ordered the guard to attention.

"You'd stink, too, if you'd been frozen for eighty years, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir," he replied, "I'm sure I would."

"At ease. I want the guard on this site doubled."

"Expecting trouble, sir?" The man's voice was nervous. He looked too eager, too young. A volunteer?

"Just call me paranoid," I said, "and then follow my orders." His salute was snapped straight out of the Corps' manual. I returned the hated gesture and went to order Disney's lunch.

Excuse me, Gregor. You just said "hated" gesture. I don't think I've ever heard you use such a strong word when talking about aspects of your job, such as saluting, before. Have you come to hate saluting?

"I ... I don't know."

I should think you'd trust the confidential nature of our discussions by now, Gregor. Please be honest.

"Yes, I think I have grown to hate it."

All right, I may want to come back to that later. Go on.

My next contact with Disney was that evening. I had been lounging in the guard quarters when my beeper went off. I hooked in, surprised to see Disney's image on the post phone's small screen. "You're supposed to be lights out, sir," I told him. "You're scheduled for some intensive rehab tomorrow. Believe me, I've been through body repair myself, you're going to need all the rest you —"

"Please call me Walt," he said, and damned if his voice didn't sound stronger already. "I've been going over the history tapes, you know, to catch up on things. I'm amazed at how simple it is to use the computer you've provided me with." I didn't tell him he had been given a child's instructional model. "I'm linked to the world, aren't I?" he continued. "I mean, I could punch in the number of anyone on this 'phonepal' listing, and have them appear on my screen?"

"If you wanted to, uh, Walt," I said, uncomfortable using first names while on duty. "You'd better check your time zones before you call, though; it's bad form to wake up strangers."

"Eh? Oh, right." He chuckled. "Actually, I'd rather wait until I'm more presentable before I go talking to anyone." He paused, the flaccid muscles of his face contorting strangely. "Gregor?"

"Yes, Walt?"

"Am I still in charge of Disney Studios? I couldn't seem to punch up any information on my financial standing."

He had hit a touchy subject. The biographical information the dream inducer had given on his life indicated that accumulated wealth was an important status indicator to him. In his day money meant a lot, and he had risen from a humble background and "made it." I would have to approach this issue carefully.

"Well, Disney Studios is now called Dismac,

which stands for Disney-McDonald-Americorp-Coca-Cola entertainment industries. As far as I know, the main reason you're here is to provide your own special touch to some very important projects they're working on. My guess is you'll be one hundred percent in charge."

"America is socialized, isn't it?"

His observation startled me. "Corporatized might be a better way to put it, Walt. And hey, people are happy," I said, and then slipped in the commercial. "The average standard of living is a lot higher than it was in your time."

"I think I'm going to like it here."

"You are?" I asked, startled again.

"The world went through troubled times while I was asleep, the history tapes have shown me that. I think it's ready for the Disney magic again, don't you?"

"We were hoping you'd feel that way, Walt."

"I'd like to see you after my morning therapy, I've got some ideas I'd like to go over with you. Good night."

"Good night," I said, and switched off.

I sat looking for a time at the blank screen. Everything I'd learned about Disney indicated he would hate an end to the small business enterprise system he had grown so rich in. Perhaps I misunderstood his motivations. I would watch this man carefully, or he would slip away, along with my chances for an early retirement.

Even Walt Disney couldn't pop up from organ transplant therapy and conduct a brainstorming session the same afternoon. He would be out for days. Satisfied that security was twice what mission parameters called for, and that I could be back to Disneyland in five minutes with military transport, I checked in with my C.O. and went back to my apartment. I wanted to drink a cold Russian beer and watch the Hivee, but Steven Gronder was on my vidphone as I stepped out of the shower.

"Howdy, Gregor," he said, an impassive grimace spreading his chins into trenches around the fortress of his face. "I heard someone rooting around in there, just checking to make sure it was you. Thought you were on assignment?"

"I am," I said, cursing the thinness of the building's walls. "I'm just taking a break, and ..." I was about to tell a tale of early bedtimes, but felt guilty. "And how about that hostage scenario? I've got a cold six-pack here, why don't you bring your set over?"

"Great," he said, "I'll be right over."

I got two beers, walked to the door, and opened it, and Steve took a beer from my hand as he waddled to the living-room table to open his tattered pack. It was full of computer disks, holographic imager plates, and a small black box that held the battle brain. He popped the beer open with one hand and

deftly set up the plates with his other. "I've already programmed in the pieces and terrain," he said, engrossed in preparation. "What odds do you want?" "Even odds."

"A hostage situation?" He looked up at me for the first time, then punched in data on his hand computer. "That's forty Ocean States marauders with two hostages, even odds would be ... three point two commandos, with Digger Suits. Do you want three or four?" I glanced over the stats of the villains appearing on my data sheet.

"Better make it four."

"A wise choice," he said, "to counteract a foolish decision." He turned the warboard on, and I moved my assault team to rescue the hostages.

"How have you been, Steve?" I asked, using my usual tactic of distraction.

"Pretty good." He was concentrating on the pieces, but was doing something strange. He moved the lightly armed Ocean States troops out of the building they had holed up in. It was my defensive fire phase, and his move was suicidal. He looked up at me, a mocking light dancing in his eyes, and said, "How's Walt Disney doing? I'll bet the food is pretty good at St. Mary's, eh?"

"You've been listening at my wall." Shock set in instantly, and I screamed, "You stupid bastard!"

"You lose," he said, laughing, as his marauders gunned down my neglected commandos.

"Steve, do you realize what you've done could be considered treason?"

"I deny listening at your wall," he said, reaching over to pull a news reader from his pack. "Do I look like a pervert?" He threw the plastic screen down on top of the warboard, open to an article on Disney's revival. The officer in charge of security and Disney's location were not mentioned, but Steve knew both now. He clucked condescendingly. "Call it historical guesswork, which you've confirmed rather nicely for me."

Steven Gronder had tricked me. Why hadn't I been informed Disney's revival was going public so soon? I should have been told. For now I had to contain damage. "I'm placing you under house arrest, Steve."

"What?" He looked at me in astonishment. "I'll miss the gaming convention in San Francisco!"

"I'll owe you one." I was already on the phone to my C.O., explaining the security leak. Steve finished his beer in sullen silence as we waited for the police.

Excuse me, Gregor, could you tell me how this made you feel?

"What, spoiling my friend's weekend and giving him a security black-check?"

Yes.

"Not unlike Judas Iscariot."

You've told me a lot about your friendship with Steve; how do you feel about it now?

"He saved my ass in the nuketire that got L.A."

Do you resent the fact that he got out of the service because of that incident, and you didn't?

"He was smart enough to have his thyroids doctored. It looked like he ballooned out because of rad damage, and he got a pension. Yes, I do resent him for that. He always seems to get ahead by cheating."

Do you feel up to continuing?

After I found out Disney was in the press, I went back to the St. Mary's command post and chewed out my adjutant for not keeping me posted on media coverage. I didn't chew very hard, since it was my fault as much as his. The next few mornings there were summaries of what the media was saying about Disney from every major data source.

Fedgov was building a base for Disney's resurfacing. The news services were awash with biography pieces, clips from cartoons and movies (many updated for Hivee), promises of projects that Disney would be personally involved in, and even outrageous offers from various collectors and museums for "pre-freeze" Disney memorabilia. I didn't like it.

The man wasn't even out of rehab yet, and he was already a media phenomenon. It was an enormous burden placed on him, and no one knew if he could be what he was before death. I considered moving him to a military medical facility, but the best chance he had was at St. Mary's. Fedgov was being careful to give misleading hints as to his location, and there was a reinforced company of marines in hidden positions around the hospital grounds.

And my best friend was under arrest.

When Disney was ready, two days later, I went in for the brainstorming session he had requested. He was seated in a support chair in a brightly lit hospital conference room, at the head of a large simoak table. He was still thin, washed out, and frail-looking, but the stench was gone, and the way his fingers drummed nervously on the support chair seemed to say he was anxious to get started. I extended my hand in greeting. "Hello, Walt. Dismac will be here soon."

"Good deal, Gregor." His handshake was firm. "I want to select my new team and get back to work." He frowned slightly and added, "You know, I'm not used to being the first one at a meeting. From now on, could you arrange for everyone to be assembled before I arrive? I'd appreciate it."

"Yes, sir." I had arranged for the others to arrive later so they wouldn't see his dependence on the support chair, but he was the boss. At least in matters like this.

When the Dismac delegation entered, I knew there would be trouble. Roger McDonald (no relation to the clown), current vice president in charge of production at Dismac, glided gracefully into the room, followed by an entourage of assistants holding their lapcomps with robotic precision.

McDonald was the wunderkind responsible for

the recent merger with Americorp. It was a move that had given Dismac an iron grip on Fedgov entertainment contracts. He was dressed conservatively, in a red three-piece business rig that hid his breast implants admirably. I knew that it wasn't enough.

Sometimes I think it's the big men in the towers of commerce who need Sandman's help more than us grunts. McDonald didn't even realize he had trod on both of Disney's feet, just by the scent of his scratch and sniff perfume. Or maybe he did. "Hello, Walt," he said, extending a limp hand and making stress indicators on Disney's support chair glow ominously. "I'm Roger McDonald, but I want you to call me Roge."

"I don't do business any other way, Roge," said Disney, and his grip was hard enough to make the man wince, "but on a first name basis. Did you bring me the bios and art samples I requested?"

"I don't do business any way but well prepared, Walt," McDonald laughed. He waved a hand, and his assistants set up the holo display generator, a gaudy white prong that thrust obscenely from the flattened spheres of its powerpack.

"I wanted to give you a nice cross-section of the types of projects we've been doing lately." He gestured impatiently, the lights dimmed, and the show began.

The cartoon images appeared solid, and when they crossed objects on the table they moved around them instead of through, as if they could actually see where they were. The presence was tangible, and the air smelled of ... rodent.

"Howdy, Walt!" screamed Mickey Mouse. "The boys and I have continued your proud traditions, with a few added twists!" The mouse kicked at a sheaf of papers strategically pre-positioned, and they flew off the table and into the air. Disney ducked as one of the papers flew towards him, not realizing it was only a hologram. The real papers were still on the table, a projection of empty space covering them.

McDonald and a few of his assistants laughed.

"Turn it off, please," said Disney.

"There is a whole new slew of techno-toys for you to play with," continued the mouse, "and your reputation for utilizing the latest advances will be maintained without —"

"TURN IT OFF!" Disney's scream drowned out the cartoon, and one of the assistants turned off the Hivee without waiting for McDonald's order. The same assistant, a thin boy, ran to the wall and turned on the room's indirects. He was the only thing



mobile in a silence full of stunned people.

"Are you all right, sir?" said the boy, moving toward Disney's support chair.

"Sit down, James."

McDonald's face was as red as his suit. There was an uncomfortable shuffling as Disney looked downward, massaging his temples. He appeared ready to break, but then looked up, smiling. It was a strained smile. McDonald's whole body locked, like a cat about to be bathed in a pig trough.

"Would someone please tell me," Disney began, his voice clogged with tension, "why Mickey looked so strange?"

"Strange, Walt?" McDonald's forehead beaded with perspiration.

"Yes," said Disney. "Distorted, thug-like, elongated — strange."

"The neo-Warner styling has gotten a tremendous public reaction, and if you'd care to see a few of the featurettes we've brought along I think you'll agree that —"

"Warner?" Disney blew his nose loudly into a handkerchief provided by the boy who had turned off the Hivee. "That's what I thought it looked like. Bugs Bunny, just an Oswald copy, and now my studio is copying their style." He slumped in his chair. "This meeting is adjourned."

"But Walt," said McDonald, "we've still got a lot of work ahead of us. There are quite a few loops to review, and —"

"Leave the equipment, I'll review them."

"I can't do that," said McDonald, grimacing, "this is my personal equipment, the material is advance preview. I can't let it out of studio possession." He stood, motioning for his assistants to collect their things.

I moved toward McDonald. One of his assistants, a breakup goon in a business suit, got between us. I pressed a button on my wristband, and my adjutant opened the door behind me. "Sir?" he said, fingering the safety on his M-24.

"Mr. McDonald has agreed to loan this equipment to Mr. Disney. Our visitors may have some trouble finding their way out." I looked over the goon. Big, menacing, and probably cybernetically enhanced. I signaled for a backup squad and fingered the taser in my pocket.

"You stupid grunt," said McDonald, "I'm taking

this stuff with me, and if you mess around I'll have your ass on its way to the Ocean States so fast it —"

"Everyone shut up!" Disney's chair rolled forcibly into the center of our stand-off. "This is ridiculous! Are you here to help me, *Roge*, or aren't you?"

"Walt, your little captain wouldn't know the first thing about running this equipment. I have to be here to oversee its use."

"I don't want you here." Disney's statement was final, and full of menace. "Since it's only your equipment you're worried about, I'll just borrow James as well." The thin boy smiled triumphantly and jumped to Disney's side. I would keep an eye on that one. Behind me, I could hear my backup, double-timing down the hall. "Are you afraid I'll be stealing from my own company?"

"No, of course not." Donald had lost all semblance of composure. "But I must insist that —"

"Don't worry," said Disney, "I'll take good care of your equipment. Now I really am tired and would like some quiet." He turned his chair around to face the wall, and that was the end. McDonald and his entourage, sans young James, were escorted out. The goon looked behind as he exited, as if memorizing my features for future use in taking them apart.

After they had gone, Disney turned around. His smile this time seemed genuinely happy. "Corporate politics haven't changed much, I see." He chuckled and turned to the boy. "Would you like to be on my team, son?"

"Very much, sir."

"Call me Walt," he said, rolling up to the equipment on the table. "Can this stuff whip up a press release for me?"

"In three dimensions, computer simulated real or actual film images, or even animation, if you like." The kid looked like he was going to swoon.

"Fine. Let's get to work getting your old boss the hell out of my company."

He rolled up his sleeves and started the process of eliminating McDonald. Within the old company, Disney's conception of things had been the way it was, period. I could see the revived Disney wasn't settling for anything less.

Disney and the boy, James, worked for hours on their project and showed me the results when they were done. It was a press release of Disney's first "victory" in regaining creative control of his company. The balls of the man! He was declaring war on the entire Dismac board of directors.

The release portrayed Disney as a man with a unique perspective, the past, and flaunted the "hard-driving optimism and faith that allowed me to found the Disney Empire." He was preparing to claim what was his.

The release had unflattering footage of McDonald, recreated from auto-steno tapes the computers had made of the meeting, and subtly enhanced footage of Disney, battered from his

encounter, but determined to regain control. I came across pretty well, too.

Disney started the next day at 06:30 by canceling his meeting with the Dismac board of directors. This was the confab McDonald was to have helped him prepare for. It was only the biggest stockholders' meeting ever, so Disney decided it wasn't important.

"Now's the time, Gregor!" His support chair was wheeling around the room in tight circles with James following closely behind, typing rapid commands into a hand computer. "The press release stirred up exactly the emotions I need from the public. Did you see it on the news?"

I had indeed seen the reactions to Disney's first press release, which was played every twenty minutes on every news channel. The Ocean States were probably sick of it by this time.

"I saw it, Walt." I stepped aside as his chair rolled towards me at full speed. "I still don't understand why you're skipping the directors' meeting." The chair skidded to a halt, and James bumped into it. Disney pivoted toward me and slammed a hand onto the armrest.

"Now's the time for a tour of my kingdom!"

"Hang on a second," I said, picturing the logistical nightmare that lay ahead. But I could see by the expression on his face — a bright glow spreading from a wide smile and wide eyes and that damned arched eyebrow — that I had better get to work or he would wheel himself there. "I'll arrange security for a complete tour." I sighed, loudly. "I suppose you'll just want to bop around, unscheduled stops and no set route?" I heaped on the sarcasm, but he didn't notice as he drummed his fingers and James leaned low so Disney could see what was going into the computer.

"That sounds excellent, Gregor." He didn't even look up. "I'll be ready to leave in an hour." The King had spoken.

And the King's word was law, or so it seemed in California. I called the Governor's office to arrange for a Central escort, since marines weren't trained in crowd control and protection. Instead of being given a red tape runaround, I spoke to Governor Ohashi herself. I told her what I needed, wary of how fast things were moving.

"No problem," she said, brushing back a strand of silky black hair. "Wish I could be there myself." She was looking at a terminal on her desk, punching keys. "You'll have air cover as well." I regretted voting against her in the last election.

Within an hour a motorcade of armored limos was blocking traffic in front of St. Mary's. If anyone in the world didn't know where Disney was staying, they did now. I called H.Q. and recommended Steven Gronder be released from house arrest. Central's gunships formed up overhead, and the Disney convoy

took the road.

Word came back that Steve had violated the terms of his movement restriction and monitoring. I pictured him at the gaming convention in San Francisco, oblivious to the reality that he was eligible for a year of no-option labor on a correctional farm. If he was locked up it would be my fault. The day was off to a bad start.

The Central men were in constant touch with their air support, and I decided I might as well sit back and watch. This was their show. Disney seemed nervous, and his whispered consultations with James made me nervous, too. This was Disney's first trip outside, and he didn't seem much impressed.

"It's, uh, interesting the way Anaheim has incorporated itself into the theme of Main Street," he said. I could see his reflection on the bulletproof window as we rolled through the street. His eyes were squinting, as if trying to shut out what he saw. I didn't want to tell him, but recognition would come soon enough.

"Sir, we're already in the park."

"This is Main Street, U.S.A.?" His voice was rising angrily. "It's dirty! Stop the car! Get me my chair!"

The Central men blurred into action, contacting the other vehicles in the motorcade, their air support, and police units clearing the road ahead. People lined the sidewalks on either side as we pulled slowly to the curb, and more were exiting the old-fashioned, sunproofed buildings to see what was happening. Cops cleared a safety zone. Disney popped the limo's door, and a ramp extended automatically.

"Even the air feels dirty!" he said, wheeling down the ramp toward the growing throng on the sidewalk. He reached the police line and seemed to try to collect himself. Then he addressed the crowd.

"My name is Walt Disney." Everyone knew. They were mostly retirees, spreading in the gut and bored with life. Normally I would have expected derisive comments at least, but these people were silent. I don't think I've ever seen a crowd so quiet. He wheeled forward onto the sidewalk, a movement reflected in hundreds of pairs of cheap polarized sunglasses, and reached out to shake hands thrust toward him through the wall of cops.

"Everyone is welcome here," he continued, "but I've got to be honest with you, I see some things I don't like!" The hands shrank back. "There's trash on the streets, and that's something we never tolerated in my day. Disneyland is a place to escape the outside world, a magical place, and I couldn't even tell when I had entered the park! I'm going to make a lot of changes here, and —" A sudden commotion on the police line made me turn, expecting the worst.

It was only a soydog vendor, dressed in turn of the twentieth century garb and pushing a brightly painted cart. "Hey, Mr. Disney!" shouted the man. He was burly, with a long handlebar mustache, sweating as

he tried to push through. "I just wanta give Mr. Disney a breakfast dog, on the house!" I looked to Disney, afraid he would seize the moment for the media. Disney seized all right.

His face was livid with anger. A mottled red flush spread across his distorted features and down his neck. With a heaving effort he stood. Yes, stood, a full week before he was scheduled to leave the support chair's network, walking unsteadily toward the soydog vendor. "Hot dogs?" he screamed. "You're selling hot dogs on the streets of Disneyland?" I rushed to pull him back to his chair, but James blocked my way.

"Let him go," the boy hissed into my ears, "give him his go, he knows what he's doing."

Before anyone could react, Disney had reached the cart and tipped its contents onto the street. The vendor, incensed at his foiled bid for free advertising, swung out to strike Disney. The Central men swarmed and clung, pinioning the vendor and taking him to the ground. Disney was standing over the cart, flailing wrathfully. Camera crews jockeyed for position as Disney's voice cut above the clamor.

"There will be no more selling of garbage here! There will be no more dirt and vermin and filth in my dreams!" Strained beyond the limits of tolerance, he fell to the ground, unconscious.

That was the moment the Ocean States chose to attack.

They must have been watching the live Hivee broadcasts; it's the only way they could have chosen that *deus ex machina* moment to make an appearance. Much as I hate the bastards, you've got to admire their tactics.

There was a rumbling, like an earthquake, shaking the hot asphalt. The clamoring of Central agents, cops, and crowd tinged with panic as the street buckled and stretched. Cracks appeared as people shouted and ran.

The streets burst open, and giant metal hands reached skyward through gooey, melted road. The hands glowed white with the heat of their fusion fields, set in the tunneling mode. Tar stench filled my head as I lunged for Disney and hefted him into a fireman's carry. I shoved him into the Governor's limo as the Ocean States' Digger Suits crawled into the morning light.

Terror spread before them as the heat of their guns turned flesh to char. Central men and cops fired point-blank into containment-field armor designed to withstand the crushing pressure of the Marianas Trench and the burning heat of a fusion torch. The high-explosive slugs ricocheted death into the crowd Disney's guards were trying to protect.

The war was mine, now.

We might have made a run for it in the limo, but the road was blocked with burning vehicles and screaming retirees. I grabbed Disney's lapels and left the car, dragging him toward cover. A Central man

reached to help me, and together we carried the unconscious body into a nearby storefront, pushing screaming, desperate people aside to gain entrance.

We moved him past racks of mouse ears and Disneyland flags toward the back of the store as the vicious sounds of fighting from the street grew louder. The gunships weren't firing their support weapons, probably afraid of hitting Disney. Without big guns, the Digger Suits couldn't be stopped.

Behind us, the store wall was ripped asunder as something huge stepped through. We pulled Disney up a flight of stairs, down a long hall with no doors or windows, and through the only door there was, at the end of the corridor. It opened into a small store-room, cluttered with mouse junk as stupid and useless as the building's design. We had gone straight into a dead end. There were no windows, tiny air vents, and no exits but the door we'd stepped through.

"Take this," I said, and handed the Central man a grenade. I carried it because I was paranoid and it only weighed forty grams. "Aim for the legs." He grinned, nodded, and went to meet the Suit. He'll get a medal if I ever get out of this coma.

The explosion was followed by a moment of silence. Then the heavy thud of the Suit's legs came echoing off the walls. A short burst of sub-machine gun fire and a scream told me the Central man was gone.

I looked to Disney. He was still out, oblivious to the trap jaws closing in. I drew my pistol and tried to reach someone, anyone, on my radio. The Digger Suit was jamming my transmission, so I increased my wrist tracer's power to maximum and prayed. The five-year battery would be dead in five minutes, but would probably outlive me. The thudding footsteps grew closer and louder, then stopped outside the door.

"I know Disney is in there!" said a harshly amplified voice. "I saw you bring him in!" The Suit seemed to shift uneasily outside the door, servomechanisms humming quietly. "We both want him alive, Gregor. I'm not going to hurt either of you, Friend." I recognized the voice.

Steven Gronder was working for the Ocean States.

"Jung-Sac, you're probably laughing at me. Wasn't it obvious? Shouldn't I have known long ago about Steve? Maybe I did. God help me, maybe I did and just repressed it back into some dark shithole in my mind and now I'll be up for a court-martial for criminal stupidity. No comments?"

None, Gregor.

"All right, then ..."

I had to stall him, with only one bargaining chip. "If you step through that door, Steve, I'll blow his head off." I pulled Disney into my lap and propped his head up with the barrel of my automatic. The door ripped easily off its hinges, and the ominous

bulk of the Digger Suit filled the doorway. I could feel heat from its hands, but the Fusion guns were off.

"Twenty-five Central agents and forty cops, Gregor, unable to use their air support, against five Digger Suits. How do you figure the odds on this scenario?"

"Why do you want Disney?" I asked, squirming for time.

"That's not Disney, you idiot." Gronder laughed. "That's a well thought out fake — Fedgov's way of taking control of Dismac. We need him as proof. It'll be quite a propaganda victory, don't you think?" The Digger Suit moved slightly, and I held Disney's body closer. "Cut the crap, Gregor!" The Suit's voice was a mechanical growl. "You've been conditioned to keep him alive, and you can't stop me. I'm taking my prize now." The voice softened, "You can come with me, if you want."

I believed that Steven Gronder didn't want to hurt me, but I didn't, couldn't, believe that the man I was holding was *not* Disney. It had to be Disney! I had seen with my own eyes ... I had been there when they ... I knew then that there was only one way to be sure. We weren't going to be rescued, and I wouldn't let Steve win this one. He seemed to sense what I intended, and the Digger Suit's massive bulk charged suddenly, giant arms raised and filling the confines of the small office.

I pulled the trigger and blew Walt Disney's head off.

Steven Gronder knocked me across the room with a crushing downward swipe from the Suit's arm. I felt my face break apart and ribs crack as I hit the wall. I didn't feel or see anything after that.

"I don't feel or see anything now, either. Am I dead?"
Far from it, Gregor. You're a hero, and quite alive. If it's any consolation, you'll be in a lot of pain shortly, when they bring you up for rehab. It was my job to ensure you had no mental trauma.

"What's the prognosis?"

Excellent, actually.

"They got Steve?"

According to the Fedgov computers, all of the Ocean States terrorists were killed in the attack. It was your tracer that allowed support weapons to be used against the Digger Suits, and your delaying tactics are credited with giving the Central gunships time to react. They're going to give you a medal for saving Disney's life.

"For what?"

Hmmmm, that is strange. The news services are reporting that you saved Disney. In fact, there's quite a lengthy interview with him.

"I blew his brains out! I know I did, it couldn't be —"

Please Gregor, take it easy. There may be a logical explanation ... or else perhaps ...

"There's no 'perhaps' about it; Steven Gronder was right."

It does appear that way.

"Hell with it. Did you find out whether I'm related to the Satini that ... Hell with that, too. It probably never happened."

Does that bother you, Gregor?

"Yes, to be honest, it does."

Does it bother you to have lost your closest friend?

Bother you enough to want to do something about it?

To take action at any perceived injustice?

"Are you nuts? I'll miss Steve a lot once I'm off the dope I must be pumped full of. I really will miss him. But he Digger Suited his own grave, and if Fedgov wants to make me a hero and say Disney is alive, so be it. This might work into an early retirement for me."

God save you, Gregor Satini, you are a good soldier. You should rest now.

TO: FEDGOV CENTRAL DATA DUMP
RESTRICTED ACCESS TOP SECRET
ALPHA RED PRIORITY VIEW ONLY
FROM: JUNG-SAC PSYCHOLOGICAL PROFILE
COMPUTER, SAINT MARY'S, CALIFORNIA
REGARDING: RECOMMENDATIONS CONCERN-
ING MARINE CAPTAIN SATINI, GREGOR A.
COMMENTS: *Gregor Satini's loyalty to Fedgov appears to remain intact after the recent Ocean States attack. His primary motivations are to retain a good service record and attain early retirement. The Disney impostor's actual identity is apparently of little concern to him. However, this unit recommends shifting Satini to other "favor" duties, in order to avoid reminding him of the episode. Further, a promotion to the rank of Major and a reduction of contract time by six months should be sufficient inducements to continued good service, in this unit's opinion.*

To be absolutely certain of continued loyalty, a one-week regimen of induced dream therapy should be undertaken.

In his sleep, Marine Major Gregor A. Satini fought desperately against the mutant demons of the Ocean States. There were hundreds of them, foul distortions of the human form, each bearing Steven Gronder's hate-filled, snarling face.

Satini struggled to contain joyous laughter that threatened to burst forth even as he went through the prearranged nightmare battles of his govdreams. It was all so ... transparent. Wonderfully see-through strings that tugged and pulled and could never be severed. Or could they? He didn't know when or how it had happened, but something had definitely changed.

He knew now which dreams were his. □



"I've been waiting for you!"

You have this fantasy, I know. You'd like to escape the mundane world of regimented work weeks, pre packaged vacations, overbearing in-laws and government restrictions. You dream of distant worlds of high adventure where naked women satisfy your every desire. Come to my world. I'll make your fantasy real!"

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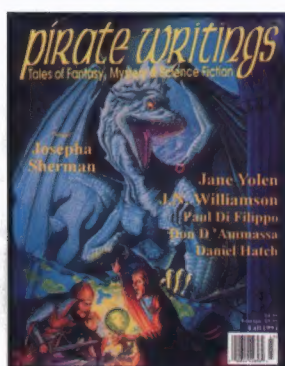
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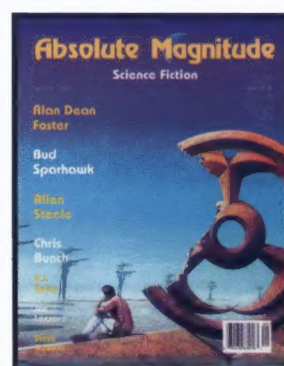
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